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# SOCIAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY

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*Professor of English in Vassar College*



## SOCIAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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## PREFACE

THE unity of the following studies consists in their common viewpoint, each essay tracing the relation between a certain body of literature and some aspects of the social conditions out of which it grew. This unity of idea is due to no attempt to illustrate the now generally accepted theory that literature is essentially social in nature and function, but results solely from the pedestrian effort to "see the object as in itself it really is." In the history of the essay and in the English poetry of the Revolution the connection between literature and life on which the criticism of our day emphatically insists is so obvious that it seems impossible to come to a full understanding either of this art-form or of these poets without recognizing the social affiliations of each.

Though conscious of many debts to many friends in writing these papers, I can mention only three. Miss Julia B. Anthony and Miss Katharine Warren have given me invaluable aid in reading proof, and Professor Gertrude Buck, for many years my associate in the English Department of Vassar College, has been indefatigable in criticism and suggestion.



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**THE ENGLISH ESSAY  
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## SOCIAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

### THE ENGLISH ESSAY

#### A STUDY IN LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

FOR the last hundred years the essay has rivaled even the novel in the breadth of its appeal and in the variety of the interests it represents. Critics, it is true, ordinarily place its golden age in the past; and they are right in so doing if they judge either by the urbane grace of the periodical essayists or by the profound humanity of a Bacon and a Montaigne. But the essay holds its place to-day far less by virtue of the excellence of any single writer or the distinction of any school than because it has, in the years since the French Revolution, become in a deeper sense than ever before the abstract and brief chronicle of its time. Created in the closing years of the Renaissance by thoughtful observers of life and soon pressed into the service of an ever-widening circle of readers, it became, with the diffusion of knowledge and the increase of curiosity in the nineteenth century, a vehicle of expression hardly less universal than fairy-tale and ballad had been in primitive times. It is at present, in fact, the one form of literature which may fairly be considered a useful as well as a fine art. The journalist finds it the most trustworthy of his tools; the teacher chooses it as the type of composition most valuable in training for general efficiency; every worker, however practical his task, is able through it most quickly to socialize his gain in knowledge. And it is because the essay has thus in a very literal sense passed from study and salon to schoolroom and workshop, from the philosopher to the man in the street, that it can vindicate its claim to be called the characteristic literary

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art of the nineteenth century. For a form of literature, like an idea, belongs only to those who use it, even appreciation of it depending on some degree of actual or potential technical ability. In Elizabethan England the poet tried his skill in a sonnet to be read by his fellow sonneteers, the critic shared his notebook with the cultured fellow critics who made up the circle at once of his acquaintance and of his audience. To-day professional essayists of all sorts write on all subjects of human concern for people of all conditions. Furthermore, the essay has been adopted as a medium of communication by the rank and file of intelligent workers, and thus has been made as never before an integral part of the intellectual and practical life of our time.

The ambiguities and contradictions in current conceptions of the essay would at first sight go far to justify the contention of certain critics that any classification of literary *genres* is impossible. These conceptions, in spite of many superficial differences, fall naturally into two well-marked groups, each emphasizing the qualities peculiar to a certain type of essay, and each supported by the evidence to which it appeals. The commonest definition declares the essay to be "a short dissertation," "a brief treatise," whether or not this statement be modified by any mention of informal and suggestive treatment. This definition is justified by the professedly expository essay, in high vogue throughout the nineteenth century; but it fails utterly when brought to the test of the familiar essay, which, through a long history of transformations, has preserved its tradition unbroken from the time of Montaigne. It is, moreover, to the essay of this latter type that the literary critic is almost infallibly attracted. To him, accordingly, the mark of the essay is not the orderly, though brief, development of its subject, but informality, suggestiveness, and freedom of treatment. Dr. Johnson's much-quoted definition — "A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition"<sup>1</sup> — is the alpha and omega of his

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary*, second edition.

creed; it gives him, indeed, a convenient touchstone by which the true essay may be known from the counterfeit.

The shortcoming of each of these definitions is, however, apparent when tested by the literature from which the other is derived. The character and scope of the essay can be rightly understood, not by limiting our field of vision or contenting ourselves with such short and easy conclusions, but by recognizing to the full all differences in method and manner, and determining the principle that accounts, not only for the "brief treatise" or the "loose sally of the mind" which are its most distinctive forms, but for all the many variations of these two that merge into and connect them.

But though these current definitions of the essay fail to characterize explicitly its nature and function, they suggest the grounds of a fundamental classification by their common insistence on the intellectual activity to which this type of literature gives expression. The essay, according to each definition, bears the mark of the thinker; one emphasizes in it the free play of mind; the other points out its relationship to the dissertation, which attempts to present its subject-matter with formal and logical completeness. In treatment, again, it is defined as falling in some degree short of adequacy: it is brief, not aiming at the exhaustive presentation of its subject; or it is irregular, allowing either for whimsical choice or for partial mastery of its subject-matter. These elements, common to the two definitions though differently stressed by them, together make up the character of the essay, the literary medium through which the thinker as such finds natural and spontaneous expression for the entire range of his typical experiences.

The tentativeness of spirit so characteristic of the essay is, as has been often pointed out, indicated by its very name. For the essay in its first meaning is nothing else than the trial, or proof, or assay of its subject; and Montaigne, when he adopted a word then coming into somewhat general use as the title for his epoch-making volume, was singularly happy in giving to the new form of literature a name that denoted the essential ten-

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dency of the critical temper to try the value and assay the meaning of the subjects with which it dealt. How close the early meaning of the word lay to its original, almost physical, sense appears interestingly in Montaigne's own statement that a certain book was written "by way of *Essaie*."<sup>1</sup> Bacon, in a letter to Prince Henry, having somewhat the same thought in mind, emphasized the informal rather than the critical character of the essay when he characterized his own essays as "brief notes, set down rather significantly than curiously."<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater, the most suggestive of modern critics in his few sentences on this subject, is thinking of the essay as the trial or proof of its subject rather than the complete exposition of it when he describes the essayist as "never judging system-wise of things, but fastening on particulars"; or when he declares that the essence of essay-writing lies "in the dexterous availing oneself of accident and circumstance, in the prosecution of deeper lines of observation."<sup>3</sup>

In these various incidental statements the peculiar intellectual activity and the characteristic temper of the essayist are as clearly implied as in the narrow definitions of more systematic critics. The weighing and testing of the subject; a presentation of it significant rather than elaborate or "curious"; freedom from the pedantry, or the restraint, of theory; the sense of the deeper meaning involved in the understanding of the particular instance,—these qualities are essentially those of the critic, the disinterested seeker after truth. The essayist finds his material in some special aspect of truth, in what one might call the concrete idea, this idea focusing in itself what it may of meaning, but lending itself to no extraneous system. Pater would place the essay midway between the poem, with its intuitive insight, and the treatise in which the "scholastic all-sufficiency" of every age seeks to justify itself. But the affiliation of the essay to poetry in its care for the concrete is

<sup>1</sup> "Of Friendship," *Essays*, ed. 1892-3, book 1, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Prince Henry, *Letters and Life*, ed. 1861-9, vol. iv, p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> "Charles Lamb," *Appreciations*, ed. 1889, pp. 119-21.

but one of its aspects ; it is also, and preëminently, the means by which the "perfected philosophic," or the typically critical temper, can best express itself.<sup>1</sup> Its poetic closeness to reality thus became possible only when thought, having completely mastered the material with which it was concerned, had re-established the connection between its abstractions and the phenomenal world. Reason, pausing to rejoice in its achievements, developed the new domain of theory, in which for the moment it rested, in the treatise or dissertation; but it discovered the essay when it attained to an intellectual intuition, parallel in the realm of thought to that of poetry in the realm of perception, and undertook to penetrate into the nature of things rather than to impose its own conclusions upon its environment.

This conception of the essay explains both its unity of spirit and its variety of form. There can be no question that it is primarily concerned, though in different degrees, with weighing and appraising the value of its materials; that in all its types reason is the master-workman. But the subjects with which it deals are hardly less various than human experience; and the spirit in which it treats them ranges from an imaginative apprehension almost as immediate as that of poem or novel to a detachment from the immediate fact only less complete than that of the philosopher. All stages of thought and all habits of thinking are thus reflected in the essay. Montaigne preëminently, Dryden and Charles Lamb perhaps most conspicuously among Englishmen, may be said to illustrate the typical essay-temper, — a temper in which the passion for truth is removed as far as possible from any touch of dogmatism, and a sense of the concrete keeps ideas from the blight of abstractness. But many men of many minds have made it their instrument. In it a nature-lover like Jefferies records his illuminating observations; an artist like Carlyle paints a picture or disguises a poem; a seer like Emerson enunciates his mystical philosophy; an analyst like John Stuart Mill elaborates his conceptions of

<sup>1</sup> "Doctrine of Plato," *Plato and Platonism*, ed. 1899, pp. 156-7.

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society and the individual; a satirist like Shaw reproves the vices of his time. Including on the one hand types of character closely related to satire or drama or novel, and on the other discussions hardly to be distinguished from those of the treatise, it lends itself to moods as unlike as those of philosopher and poet; it is far from no subject that interests its age and is untouched by no spirit that moves it.

Yet in all these variations it maintains its distinctive character. The lyric poem, even in the most highly elaborated of its changing forms, gives expression to the simple spontaneous emotion, which, in the face of experience, the poet feels more vividly than his fellow man. The drama, from Sophocles to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to Synge, presents to our vision, in some form or other, the struggle of human will and passion after self-realization. And in like manner the essay, through all the protean shapes in which we know it, represents the world as it looks to the critic, to the disinterested thinker who seeks only to know and to body forth the truth.

It is inevitable from the nature of the essay that it should be among the latest of literary forms in origin, and that its history should be throughout associated with the development of the scientific, or rational, spirit. Not that it sprang in modern times out of nothing. The impulse that shaped it may be traced to the furthest limit of recorded literary history, but as a secondary element in the more obvious and absorbing intellectual activities. Its beginnings lie, moreover, beyond our knowledge, since the prose in which men's thinking faculties were first exercised was doomed to speedy forgetfulness. Our lyric verse we can trace back to the rhythmic utterances of a group of poet-men, as yet conscious of hardly more than their human fellowship; our stories and plays to their reproductions of the scenes in which they, or some of them, had borne a part. But the pedestrian conversations in which the essay had its source were forgotten long before the poetic refrain ceased to linger in men's memory or the stories of their heroes to be told and retold by camp-fire or hearth.

For the most part, the spirit that was later to find expression in it grew up under the shelter of the more utilitarian interests; the practically minded embodied the wit and wisdom of primitive talkers in proverbs, or the thoughtful turned from poetry to elaborate their elementary creeds. After that remote and irrecoverable past when men were spelling out the letters of later thought, there followed a long period in which, though the essay had not yet come into being, the forces that were to create it tried themselves in various ways. The literatures of Greece and Rome contain many writings that might be considered forerunners, or even early forms of the essay. Plato may almost be called the first of the essayists, so essay-like is the profound yet informal treatment of the subjects discussed in the dialogues, and so closely akin to the essay is the dialogue in spirit and method. Plutarch's *Morals* and the *Characters* of Theophrastus show, in the later periods of Greek literature, more than an approximation to the modern essay; Cicero, whose writings so deeply influenced both the thought and the style of the Renaissance, was virtually an essay-writer, and the "dispersed meditations"<sup>1</sup> of Seneca's *Epistles* were recognized by Bacon as essays under another name. Yet these writings, to which the men of the Renaissance looked back for inspiration and example, were, comparatively speaking, sporadic and isolated. Not until the later years of the Renaissance did there emerge such a temper of mind as would allow for the development of the essay. In the storms of its early political and religious struggles, the individual had made good his claim to live his own life and had embodied his ideal of that life in the world of Renaissance art; but only when he had entered into his full heritage of freedom, and held high discourse with himself on the meaning of human experience, could the essentially rational spirit find expression in the art-form that was its natural embodiment.

The publication of the first two volumes of Montaigne's

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Prince Henry, *Letters and Life*, ed. 1861-9, vol. iv, p. 340.

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*Essays* in 1580 marks the beginning of the English almost as truly as of the French essay. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, great among the skeptical philosophers of the day, not only stamped the essay with such a character that he may well be called its creator, but established a tradition of thought and feeling that has since his time been a shaping power in the literature of Europe. In circumstances as by temperament, he was, according to all testimony, singularly fitted to be the first of the great essayists. His grandfather, a Bordeaux merchant of rising fortune, had been able, more than fifty years before the birth of Michel, to buy a noble estate, which, with increasing prosperity, had given his family a dignified and influential position, and opportunity, at least in the case of the essayist's father, for a liberal education and some knowledge of the world. It is probable that from his mother Montaigne inherited a strain of Spanish and Jewish blood, and that through her he became familiar with the doctrines of the Reformation, which had been adopted by some of her relatives.

In a family so various in interest and so tolerant in spirit as this, the young Montaigne was brought into close touch with all that was most vital in the society of his day: with its clashing religious beliefs, its practical activities, its vivid concern with philosophy and art and scholarship. But the opposing forces of the age, however reconciled in his home, were at war in France throughout almost the whole of his life. In literature the spontaneous imaginative impulse of the Renaissance had even in his youth begun to fail, and the critical effort to determine the nature of classic standards and to form in accordance with them a literature worthy of the inheritance from antiquity was disciplining into new taste the instinct for natural and original expression. In religion the opposing parties were, in his childhood, already engaged in what must have seemed to many their final struggle. Calvin's *Institutes* was translated into French in 1540, the year when Loyola founded the society of the Jesuits; and from the revolt against the *gabelle* in Bordeaux, in 1548, to the accession of Henry IV, in

1589, the country was hardly ever free from civil war. In an age like this, seething with partisan argument and passionate in its application of premature theory to practice, a disinterested point of view seemed well-nigh impossible. Yet those untoward circumstances apparently never turned Montaigne from his philosophical interest in truth; they may even, by the force with which they pointed their moral, have accentuated that critical detachment of mind and that humanity of sympathy which made him so original an interpreter of life.

Natural as Montaigne's position now seems, the attainment of a consistently rational attitude toward experience was in the sixteenth century no small achievement. The speculative temper when it appeared in the Renaissance was thoroughly at variance with the customs and traditions of the world in which it found itself; and in the clash between the old order and the new the advance guard of thinkers inevitably paid the penalty of an almost entire separation from the moral and social conventions of their time. The price at which these pioneers in new realms of thought bought the intellectual freedom which they bequeathed to Europe was too often, as Vernon Lee has pointed out, the loss of all moral standards and all sense of social responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

From such a position Montaigne was saved by his vigorous sense of reality, by the fervor of his skepticism, by the very absoluteness with which he took reason to be his guide. "A melancholy humor . . . bred by the anxietie, and produced by the anguish of carking care" first, he tells us, put the "conceipt of writing" into his head.<sup>2</sup> But there is no trace of melancholy or weariness of spirit in the *Essays*; they are the very incarnation of that passion for understanding which separates the thinker alike from the man of action and from the poet. It was the integrity with which he followed this passion for understanding that made him choose as his subject — because

<sup>1</sup> *Euphorion*, ed. 1899, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> "Of the affection of fathers to their children," *Essays*, ed. 1892-3, book II, p. 66.

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he knew it best<sup>1</sup> — the familiar self from which he professedly sought escape. As truly a repetition of himself as the *Confessions* of St. Augustine or Rousseau, or the *Autobiography* of Benvenuto Cellini, the *Essays* are among the greatest of those self-revelations that form so valuable a part of our literary inheritance.

But in their self-revelation there appears an element far different from either the noble sincerity of St. Augustine or the towering egoism of Benvenuto Cellini; an element that later modifies such records as Newman's *Apologia* or John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. Unlike his predecessors in self-portrayal, Montaigne reduced his experience to what Mr. Saintsbury has called the "common denominator of the practical reason,"<sup>2</sup> and thus transformed a story usually colored by prejudice and emotion into the impartial analysis of a disinterested observer. Nor was this power of impersonal self-criticism and self-interpretation due to any poverty of nature. The skeptical spirit that in a very real sense makes him as a thinker "the first of the moderns" was in him united with a largeness and an intensity of vision that mark him as belonging to the spacious days of the Renaissance. There were, of course, limits in his experience. He was content to leave speculations on the unknown for mastery of the here and now. Depths of spiritual passion he did not sound. Gleams of a celestial vision were so far from his stoical philosophy that even we of lesser mould may sometimes "in our altitudes despise him a little." But if he did not profess to range far, he frankly accepted the conditions of human life, and, in an age that lived much in Utopia, found in the realities of that life both happiness and inspiration.

Serene acceptance of fact and profound knowledge of himself led Montaigne to a truly modern perception of the rights of other men to the fulfillment of their own natures. "I am not,"

<sup>1</sup> "Never man handled subject he understood or knew, better than I doe this I have undertaken; being therein the cunningest man alive." "Of Repenting." *Essays*, ed. 1892-3, book III, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to *Essays*, vol. I, p. xxviii.

he tells us, "possessed with this common error, to judge of others according to what I am my selfe. I am easie to beleeve things differing from my selfe. . . . And I beleieve and conceive a thousand manners of life, contrarie to the common sort: I more easily admit and receive difference, than resemblance in us."<sup>1</sup> It was, perhaps, this recognition of the individuality of his fellows and of the substantial reality of their existence, that enabled him to see himself not as the exception, but as one of the many, and to portray himself in his "owne genuine, simple and ordinarie fashion, without contention, art or study."<sup>2</sup> This generous acceptance of diversity in individuals and of the right of these individuals to a many-sided development made him the founder of a new era in culture, the era when the mystic asceticism of the Middle Ages yielded to a free intellectual activity and the modern world took on something of classic largeness and vigor. He was the first of the practical humanists, the spiritual ancestor of thinkers like Goethe and Matthew Arnold, who, nurtured in classic tradition, have approached daily experience in the spirit of Greece and Rome. Though his interests centered far more than theirs in the understanding of what he could, at least intellectually, touch, taste, and handle, he attained through sheer integrity of judgment to a perception of the deeper meanings of life denied to many apparently more spiritually minded than he. It is from the experiential philosopher that we have the record of a friendship which, putting to shame alike the worldly wisdom of Bacon and the mystical egoism of Emerson, can for tenderness and intimacy be best compared with that commemorated by Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. But the experience that gave weight to Montaigne's thought never clouded his judgment. Balance and sanity were in his eyes the beauty of holiness. Excess even of righteousness was foreign to him; in the age of St. Bartholomew, he could avow that though he might follow truth to the fire, he could scarcely burn for it.

<sup>1</sup> "Of Cato the Younger," *Essays*, ed. 1892-3, book 1, pp. 245-6.

<sup>2</sup> "The Author to the Reader," *ibid.*, p. 12.

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The first of the essayists was the preacher of moderation as truly as he was the seeker after truth or the lover of the fact.

Montaigne's *Essays*, so modern in their realism and intimacy, and so truly a revelation of that for which the age was half-consciously groping, became an immediate influence in European thought. Englishmen responded quickly to their charm. Shakespeare and Bacon, to mention only the greatest names, paid them the tribute of quotation or adaptation; and Florio's translation made them after 1603 almost as much a possession of England as of France. But in spite of Montaigne's general influence, the essay took in its beginning in England a very different character from that which he had impressed upon it. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, while Spenser was still writing *The Faerie Queen* and Shakespeare presenting his great comedies, there was everywhere evident a new and prophetic curiosity as to the actual facts of life and the laws which ruled human action,—a curiosity through which men were passing from the imaginative enthusiasm of the Renaissance to the scientific enthusiasm of the following centuries.

One manifestation of this incipient interest in the everyday world is of especial significance to the student of the essay: writers who were falling under the spell of the new passion for knowledge turned from the sonnet-writing that had amused them a few years earlier to the keeping of notebooks, in which, sometimes for their own pleasure and sometimes for discussion with their friends, they epitomized their reading and wrote down their reflections. It was this habit of keeping and comparing notebooks, rather than Montaigne's discursive treatment of life, that gave to the first English essays their peculiar character. An anonymous writer in 1596 shows us how easy was the transformation of one into the other when he explains that, as he has framed his essays only for his own use, he has taken "no great paine, to set them foorth anye better," and adds that much of his material was taken from the

writings of the past, from the "faire flowers" of which he has "gathered this small heape," and, as time and leisure served, "distilled them and kept them as precious."<sup>1</sup> This fashion was closely followed by Bacon when in 1597 he published a thin volume of ten essays, which were, in fact, little more than scattered notes or abstracts, the epitome of his reading and reflection on subjects of especial interest to a young man deeply concerned in public affairs. His comparatively slight esteem for his essays is very evident. He declared in the dedication to the first edition that he published them only because they were already going to print;<sup>2</sup> and in 1625, when they were at last completed, and he had come to regard them as among "the best fruits of his labor," he rested his hope of their lasting "as long as books last" on "the Latin volume of them."<sup>3</sup>

These "brief notes" of his observation and thought, set down in this wise, because "just treatises" require "leisure in the writer, and leisure in the reader,"<sup>4</sup> bore small resemblance to Montaigne's rambling and intimate essays. But the form chosen by Bacon was peculiarly suited to his purpose. To him the essay was but an occasional means for the expression of those *obiter dicta* that were perhaps the weightier because the author was intent on larger ends. For this purpose nothing could have been found better than the notebook essay of the day, which he pressed into his service, and which, by its condensation, brevity, and point, brought his ideas home to the business and bosoms of men.

Nor did the history of the Baconian essay end with Bacon. A number of his contemporaries, more or less inspired, continued to make use of it. Ben Jonson's *Timber*, at once a volume of essays in embryo and an abstract of the great scholar's blended reading and reflection, shows it in the very process of

<sup>1</sup> Harold V. Routh, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. 1907-, vol. iv, 392-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, ed. 1857-9, vol. vi, p. 523.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Prince Henry, *Letters and Life*, ed. 1861-9, vol. iv, p. 340.

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coming into being. Almost in our own day, Emerson expressed in it his mystical vision and poetic insight. Such diversities as these in temperament and point of view indicate the compass of even the narrower form of the essay shaped by Bacon out of what seemed a passing fashion. Less flexible and less intimate than the Montaigne essay, this later type was confined to a more specific use, but in its own sphere it boasts a literature unequaled in weight and vigor of matter.

Few in number as are Bacon's essays, they, of all his works, give the truest idea of his intellectual character. For while in the *Advancement of Learning* or the *New Atlantis* he embodied his dream of a world worthy of the Renaissance hope for humanity, he was in these occasional observations revealing that wonderful union of practical shrewdness and lofty wisdom which is the keynote of his character. The son of Sir Nicholas Bacon, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, and from his birth connected with the life of the court, he was thoroughly at home in the society of his day even while he was shaping the world of the future. The contradictions so conspicuous in his character as statesman and as philosopher were as apparent in his habit of thought. The most patient of thinkers, he had in his enthusiasm for knowledge a freshness and an ardor that are ordinarily the birthright of the poet; in dealing with men and events, where passion usually burns at the fiercest, he was marked by the coolness and detachment supposed to be characteristic of the philosopher.

In the essays, these qualities, paradoxical as they appear, are united in the poetic apprehension of the practical concerns of life and the large judgment of their value and meaning. The subjects sound as a rule trite enough, being in the main limited to such generally familiar topics as Friendship, or Youth and Age; and to those, like Great Place, or Ceremonies and Respects, of particular concern to men interested in public affairs. The readers whom Bacon addressed found stimulus not in new or far-fetched themes, in subtle distinctions or delicate shadings of thought, but in the variations played

upon those general truths, commonplace perhaps but none the less profoundly human, which occupied so large a place in their philosophy of life. In the treatment of these large subjects Bacon stands alone. To him thought and fact, no less than idea and image, are one; the very prejudices that he would destroy appear before him visually as the idols that men ignorantly worship, the idols of forum and cave and market-place and theater. It is to their combination of sound sense and imaginative perception that the peculiar weight and richness of the essays is due, the imagery that ordinarily yields only poetic suggestion being in them pressed into the service of exact and practical thought. With Bacon thought and image alike center in the practical; or, rather, the practical is itself both thought and poetry.

This sense of the more tangible realities with which he was chiefly concerned appears in his treatment of all subjects; he would seem to value friendship, for example, rather for its power to enrich and ennable one's life than from any purely ideal or sentimental consideration. It accounts, too, in great part for his immediate popularity: his first readers, men trained in the duties of a complete courtier and keenly interested in affairs of state, were ready to appreciate to the full the "civil and moral counsels" that were the outcome of so wide and accurate a knowledge of life. The practical quality of Bacon's essays, closely related as it was to the political activities and general taste of his time, was, moreover, saved from narrowness hardly less by its essential poetry than by its connection with his philosophy. The spiritual was, in the eyes of this enthusiast for nature and natural law, inextricably bound up with the material; and the most insignificant of life's toils and the most tortuous of its processes were thus of supreme interest to him. His firm insistence on fact was enlarged by his passionate care for truth, and his belief that through its attainment the life and estate of men might be infinitely improved. His one direct quotation from Montaigne is the saying that a liar "is brave

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towards God and a coward towards men.”<sup>1</sup> It was, indeed, in their common love for truth that he was most closely allied with his great predecessor. Yet though in this he was like Montaigne, he was like him with a difference. Montaigne was essentially the observer and the skeptic: his chosen home was the room in the tower that has become the very symbol of detachment; he took the balance for his emblem and his motto was *Que sçais-je?* Bacon’s intellectual temperament was, on the other hand, akin in its intensity to that of prophet and poet; his enthusiasm for truth, his passion for the good of mankind, had, notwithstanding their differences in aim, much in common with the religious fervor of the mystic. It is this ardor of mind which gives the essays their peculiar character, reminding us of the “naked and open day-light,” which, though it “doth not shew the masks and mummeries and triumphs of the world, half so stately and daintily as candle-lights,” inspires in us something of the essayist’s joy in the inquiry and the knowledge and the belief of truth, which is in his eyes “the sovereign good of human nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Unmatched as Bacon’s essays were in fullness of content and perfection of expression, their direct influence on the later history of the essay was surprisingly small. The essayists of his own time recognized him, it is true, as their pattern and leader; but, perhaps because of the type of the essay used by him, he was to his successors of the next two generations a moulder of thought rather than a model of literary form. There was, indeed, in the early seventeenth century no such widespread freedom of spirit, no such intellectual curiosity, as would make the general use of the essay possible. Nor was this freedom of spirit and intellectual curiosity possible of attainment until the revolution of which Bacon was the great harbinger had been effected. The predominating enthusiasm of the Renaissance

<sup>1</sup> “Of Truth,” *Works*, ed. 1857, vol. vi, p. 379. Cf. “For, what can be imagined so vile, and base, as to be a coward towards men, and a boaster towards God?” “Of giving the lie,” *Essays*, ed. 1892-3, book II, p. 402.

<sup>2</sup> “Of Truth,” *Works*, ed. 1857, vol. vi, pp. 377-8.

had been called out by the desire for self-expression and the love of beauty; it had led to the vindication of men's right to live their lives unhindered and to the representation in art of this freer and more individual life. The rational temper which was later to create the essay, though it had been a strong element in this earlier period of personal and artistic self-expression, had, at least in its more explicit forms, appeared chiefly in the fields of religious and critical controversy. An enthusiasm for right reason, an absorbing sense of the greatness of knowledge, had to become the ruling powers even in practical life before a predominantly intellectual experience could become the subject-matter of literature.

In the development of this intellectual temper, the temper that we recognize as essentially modern, Bacon held the first place, — but Bacon the philosopher rather than Bacon the essayist. His formulation of the new philosophy — the philosophy already implicit in the theology of Hooker and in the criticism of Ben Jonson as well as in the scientific methods of the age — was perhaps the chief force that, by giving it knowledge of itself, stimulated the development of the spirit that was to rule the following centuries. The greatest thinkers, says John Morley, must have "the presentiment of the eve," must recognize under the evident forces of their time the working of those hidden agencies that are to shape the future.<sup>1</sup> In the recognition of these germinal forces lies Bacon's chief claim to greatness. He not only felt their working dimly, but came to understand their nature with something of a prophet's prescience and to proclaim them with something of a prophet's fervor; and his service as a man of letters was thus completed and surpassed by his influence on those habits of thought and life whence all art springs.

While Bacon and his less famous contemporaries were fashioning the English essay, there grew up beside it an allied form of literature destined greatly to affect its later development.

<sup>1</sup> "Thomas Babington Macaulay," *Critical Miscellanies*, ed. 1893-1908, vol. 1, p. 291.

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The "character," as distinct from the portrait, deals with types or classes, and so necessarily presupposes a somewhat analytic attitude toward the actual life and conditions of the people it describes. The tendency to portray such type-characteristics had in earlier days closely followed the trend of social and ethical interest, appearing conspicuously in the allegorical descriptions of *The Vision of Piers Ploughman*, in the satires of the sixteenth century, and, more fully developed, in the many studies of rogues and vagabonds. But these earlier character-sketches were always incidents in a larger work; the character as a separate form of literature was almost unknown until about the beginning of the seventeenth century, when a new interest in daily life followed hard on the growing wealth and luxury and the growing religious and political earnestness of England. It thus came into existence as a result of the same critical and practical temper that had been so efficacious in the creation of the essay, though it stressed the concrete elements of an experience which the essay undertook to interpret rationally.

To writers awakening to the artistic and ethical possibilities of the new world of everyday reality the *Characters* of Theophrastus, the pupil and successor of Aristotle, furnished stimulus and example. First translated into Latin by Casaubon in 1592, these *Characters*, giving realistic pictures of life in Athens in the time of Alexander, became one of the most potent among the classic influences of the following years. Forthwith the English character, largely influenced by this lately accessible classic model but the outgrowth of a slowly growing concern with real life, took its place as one of the more popular of the minor literary forms; among readers marked by strong but elementary social interests it apparently surpassed in immediate effectiveness both the essay and the satire.

For this rapid development of the character there were many reasons, the most evident being the ease with which it lent itself to practical purposes. The satirist found in it a weapon only less keen than the "portraits" of Dryden or Pope; the moral-

ist, a picture hardly less potent to teach than the long-familiar fable or parable. It was, moreover, singularly fitted, not only to serve these ethical and social ends, but to give expression to the habit of mind most characteristic of the early seventeenth century. For the character is a sort of half-way house between the purely imaginative portrayal of an object and the critical exposition of its meaning; and so it lent itself with peculiar felicity to the needs of a generation that was turning from the artistic world of the Renaissance to the rational world of later centuries. It is true that this change to a more critical point of view appears everywhere; — it is no more evident in the character than in Donne's descriptions and Waller's couplets, in Jonson's plays and Hobbes's translations. But, by what might be called its attempt after definition in the concrete, the character offered an obvious opportunity for the growing rational spirit to try itself, and marked an important stage in the developing naturalism of the seventeenth century.

Its connection with the essay is even closer than that which has so often been pointed out with the realistic novel. Though they bore different names and reflected slightly different phases of contemporary interest, the relationship between them through the first half of the seventeenth century was so intimate that they were not only constantly published together, but were at times almost indistinguishable in subject-matter and method. A volume of Donne's, for example, published as late as 1652, and entitled *Paradoxes, Problemes, Essayes, Characters*, contains only one essay proper; but the problems and paradoxes, discussing with the fantastic ingenuity of a decadent school such topics as women's love of feathers and the beauty of painted faces, are essays under a different name, while the characters are essays of the type we still know in Lamb's *Poor Relations* and Hunt's *The Old Gentleman*. It was inevitable not only that forms of literature so similar in nature and social function should powerfully influence each other throughout their whole history, but that the more fundamental and flexible of them should dominate the type finally devel-

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oped through their interaction. Accordingly, after its brief period of independent greatness in the seventeenth century, the character came to be regarded as a form of the essay. In this relation it has constantly tended to strengthen the concrete elements that have marked the essay from its beginning, while it has in turn gained infinitely in flexibility of treatment, and in scope and refinement of subject-matter. Its later history is singularly interesting and varied. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it enriched the periodical essay and had, especially through the Sir Roger De Coverley papers, no small share in the development of the novel. It later created a whole gallery of character-portraits, of which those of Dick Minim and Beau Tibbs are perhaps the most famous. In the last hundred years, besides giving us innumerable studies of persons and places in their more typical aspects, it has lent itself to such social satire as Thackeray's *Book of Snobs* and such exquisite criticism as Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*.

For more than a generation after Bacon's death there was an apparent pause in the history of the essay. Though it had grown up in response to the very real needs of its time, and though it had at once achieved greatness, every condition for its further development was wanting in the years immediately following its creation. The intellectual curiosity and the dispassionate spirit which were the very conditions of its existence were manifestly impossible when England's political and religious fate was trembling in the balance, and when party and principle were identified in the struggle for national independence.

And if the essayist had small leisure for the disinterested search after truth on which his work rests, he was even less able to find an audience that cared for what he might have to say. The comparatively narrow literary circle for which his predecessors had written had vanished in the years of national storm, while the larger reading public to which his successors could appeal was as yet unformed or barely coming to consciousness of itself and its desires. The language in which he

could express himself was, moreover, if not wholly lacking, still difficult and unformed; the prosaic as distinct from the poetic temper had before it a task of genuine creation, and until that task was finished had no fit vehicle of expression. The essentially poetic prose of the Elizabethans was at an almost world-wide distance from the age of Hampden and Pym; men of learning, in spite of the example of Hooker and Hobbes, were still writing in Latin, and ordinary prose was hopelessly over-weighted with awkward and uncouth Latinisms. General taste was, moreover, vitiated by the liking for elaborate fancies and fantastic ornaments which was inherited from the early Ciceronians and Euphuists, while it had found as yet no standard of expression by which to test and clarify its thinking processes.

In such conditions the need of a simple, direct medium of communication could be perceived only by the artist capable of creating it. But the burning questions of religion and politics attracted the best minds to practical realms, or drove them to a dogmatic partisanship equally remote from the disinterested creative attitude. Milton, drawn perforce into politics, wrote pamphlets matchless in eloquence as in abuse; Sir Thomas Browne, a mystic alien to his turbulent age, embodied his musing meditations in prose that is almost poetry; but the few essayists proper either echoed Bacon in their commonplace moralizings or turned to tedious, because unskilled, discussions of political and theological questions. Yet though their work was for the most part mediocre, it did something to shape the essay to the minds of its readers. The religious essays of those years in particular, though dull and often polemical in tone, were among the sturdiest pioneers in the field of the special essay, which from the time of Dryden became so important an agent in the moulding of English thought.

But though the development of the essay seemed for the time to be suspended, the social forces at work in this transitional period were determining the conditions of its later history. The interest and effectiveness of the essay as such depends on

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the prevalence among readers of a critical and reflective habit of mind. The rational spirit, which, however conspicuous in its leading thinkers, had been a secondary factor in the daily life of the earlier Renaissance, was greatly strengthened as well as far more widely diffused during the years when the English Commons were struggling for political and religious freedom. In those days of trial we see the national temper transforming itself from the imaginative enthusiasm of the Elizabethan age to the passion for reason that marked the England of the Revolution. The spirit evoked was, of course, oftenest narrow and dogmatic: in struggle over the king's prerogative, the rights of the bishops, the power of the people, in endless discussion about ship-money, monopolies, and religious ceremonies, it took a turn repellently argumentative and partisan. Yet adverse as were these conditions to the immediate future of the essay, they were potent to create the new England of which it was to be a chief means of expression. The energy called forth in discussing the momentous questions of that great age revolutionized the intellectual life of England. Though for a time interest in knowledge seemed to fail in the stress of practical activity, and humane habits of thought to be further than ever from attainment, yet the strengthening of the nation's critical power, whatever the apparent loss, was the one means by which it could advance to a more universal and liberal culture. Interest in the larger national issues not only became general in the middle class, as yet little touched by them, but tended to develop in that much wider circle the care for truth, the confidence in individual judgment and the habit of relatively clear thinking which had hitherto been largely confined to scholars and gentlemen.

From the time of the Restoration this change in national spirit became increasingly evident. With the establishment of a settled government and some measure of civil and religious freedom, modern England, which had shaped itself in hardly more than a generation of conflict, appeared in its essential lineaments. Most conspicuous among the many signs of

change — and the best measure of the distance traveled by the national mind since the days of Elizabeth — was the unprecedented development of the scientific, or critical, spirit. The leading men of the age were suddenly possessed by it. The predominating tone of thought became inquisitive and skeptical. The authority of tradition was attacked, the facts of nature were everywhere appealed to. The sciences became subjects of engrossing interest. Charles the Second and his courtiers found time to devote to serious scientific study, the king even fitting up a chemical laboratory for his own use. The Royal Society, the successor of a little group of "diverse worthy persons" who first met in Oxford in 1645 to inquire "into natural philosophy and other parts of human learning," obtained its charter in 1662 and at once became an important factor in the thinking of the day. Dryden and Cowley were among its first members; and Dryden's statement that the *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* "was sceptical according to that way of reasoning which was used by Socrates, Plato, and all the academics of old, . . . and which is imitated by the modest inquisitions of the Royal Society,"<sup>1</sup> was but one of the many indications of the wide diffusion of a more or less scientific point of view. Thinkers in all fields were, indeed, intent on the same ends: philosophers and theologians, critics of society and critics of literature, were alike endeavoring to determine the elementary laws that might bring order into the chaos of their as yet largely unanalyzed experience. A hardly less important factor in the development of the essay than this general trend toward a more critical view of life was the existence of a large class of potential readers, already somewhat practiced in political and religious discussion, and aware of the value of the printed page in matters that concerned them. For the moment the audience of the new writers was, it is true, small enough, consisting of hardly more than the court circle and those citizens who cared to imitate its literary fashions as well as its social follies. But

<sup>1</sup> "Defence of an *Essay of Dramatic Poesie*," *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. 1900, vol. I, p. 124.

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the many who had eagerly read pamphlets and news-sheets during the years of parliamentary struggle, though in the first lassitude of reaction content with sermon or tract or romance, were sure, in progress of time, to claim their share in the literary and social as well as in the political interests of their day.

An early sign of the change in national temper that had gone on unheeded in the age of political struggle was the creation — or re-creation — soon after the Restoration of the critical or technical essay. This essay, dealing with special questions and primarily concerned with matters of knowledge, was peculiarly adapted to satisfy the awakening curiosity of the new reading public; and, as a matter of fact, for a few years it supplanted in interest and importance the personal or reflective essay that had taken shape in the Renaissance.

Intimately, however, as the growth of this essay-form was connected with the transformation of public taste, its immediate greatness was due almost wholly to the work of John Dryden. Dryden, it is true, created no new thing. The essay treating of special subjects, most frequently of morals or theology, had been making many experiments, usually untoward, in the last few decades; the essay-preface, introduced long before by Caxton, was not only coming into somewhat general use, but had of late received contributions from a critic as distinguished as the great Hobbes himself; the dramatic criticism of Corneille and his fellow workers in France was rich in suggestion not only as to aesthetic theory but as to the essay-treatment of its subject-matter. Yet, considerable as were the achievements of his predecessors and contemporaries, Dryden may fairly be accounted the founder of the critical essay, since he first truly popularized the discussion of technical questions, and so made the knowledge of the specialist comparable in interest and importance with the more evident humanity of the earlier essayists.

The purely literary questions Dryden treats were, of necessity, living issues to the critics of his day, when old forms had passed away and new ones were still to be discovered. His in-

terest in them was, moreover, especially vital, for as poet and dramatist he was forced to a full understanding of the perplexities and of the practical significance of the critical problems with which he dealt. His essays were almost always prefaces, written in connection with some experiment of his own, and often defending or explaining an opinion recently adopted or in process of making. His history as a critic is thus the history of a search after the truth concerning literary methods and literary values, as now one and now another problem pressed itself upon his attention. And he is perhaps the best spokesman of an age whose interest in theory was essentially experimental and practical, because he remained throughout his life singularly free from critical dogmatism, frankly changing his ground as he reached a new point of view, or, if he had not yet reached it, laying before his readers the balanced evidence from which they must draw their own conclusions.

Dryden was the first among the great critics to approach literature as Montaigne and Bacon had approached life. He had learned from "honest Montaigne," he tells us in the *Preface to the Fables*, that "the nature of a preface is rambling, never wholly out of the way, nor in it."<sup>1</sup> But his likeness to the first of the essayists is far deeper than any such superficial similarity of method. With strong personal interest in the questions he discusses, he unites the freedom and candor of the disinterested truth-lover; with the intellectual flexibility of the born skeptic, the realist's sense of fact: and thus his essays, though they deal with what is in the strictest sense the technical subject-matter of literary criticism, have more than a touch of the imaginative vigor of Bacon and the generous humanity of Montaigne.

But Dryden was of the school of Shakespeare as well as of the school of Bacon and Montaigne. Like his forerunner Corneille, he was a great critic no less because he was a great poet than because he was a great thinker. It was, indeed, of no small significance for its later history that the writer who in its begin-

<sup>1</sup> *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. 1900, vol. II, p. 255.

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ning stamped upon the technical essay something of his own intellectual character was endowed with the poet's reach of vision and fullness of perception. It is easy to gather from Dryden's writings, influenced as they frequently were by current opinion, judgments that are the derision of later criticism. But his fair-minded effort to see the object at which he was looking stamped his essays with nobility and breadth, while his intuitive penetration into the ultimate sources of poetic greatness gave them permanent value.

Dryden, though he perhaps represented his age more fully than any other single man, was but one of a distinguished group of writers. Temple's essays may hardly rise above cultured mediocrity, but they reflect in their clear judgments and facile style the best taste of the men of letters of the day; Halifax, in the *Character of a Trimmer*, used a glorified form of the character, or, perhaps, rather of the character-essay, to set forth his ideas on politics; Defoe's *Essay on Projects* is the epitome of his age in its curiosity and inventiveness. More enduring in human interest than any of these are the essays of Abraham Cowley, published as early as 1668, and carrying on in this skeptical and critical period the tradition of the meditative personal essay. These *Essays in Verse and Prose*, the work of a minor poet of a by-gone school, have a charm that is all their own. It is chiefly in them that Cowley, the darling of his generation and the master of Dryden's youth, lives to-day. In such essays as those on *The Garden* and *The Danger of Procrastination*, *Of Himself* and *Of Solitude*, he reveals with singular directness and informality the manner of man that he was. Made a poet, he tells us, before he was twelve years old, by the reading of Spenser's poems; torn at the age of twenty-five from Cambridge, his beloved university, by "that violent Public storm which . . . rooted up every Plant, even from the Princely Cedars to me the Hyssop";<sup>1</sup> suffering in the misfortunes of the royal family and sharing but scantily in its successes, he led a life marked by strange and painful vicissitudes. But, if one may

<sup>1</sup> "Of Myself," *Essays, Plays, and Sundry Verses*, ed. 1906, p. 457.

judge from his writings, outer misfortunes hardly touched the serenity of Cowley's spirit; his essays take us from the storms of public life into the placid days of a lover of quiet and books, into the tranquil meditations of a poet and thinker, who, without the reach of Montaigne or the exquisite concreteness of Lamb, has something of the humanity and disinterestedness of both.

The critical essay, made illustrious by Dryden, was quickly superseded by the popular periodical essay, with its brief treatment of occasional themes. For the rapid development and immediate influence of this new essay-form there were excellent reasons. Its presentation of everyday people and problems satisfied the social instincts of the age, while the brevity of the papers, the regularity with which they appeared, and even the commonplaceness of most of their subjects, made the strongest of appeals to the general reader, to whom they were primarily addressed. For general readers in the years immediately following the Restoration were comparative strangers to books, and had neither the wide range of interest nor the intellectual discipline that could make them at home in the new world of letters. The critical essay — even Dryden's — they left to the circle of professional writers and the coterie of aesthetes, ladies or gentlemen, who aspired to culture; for themselves they asked lighter entertainment, or at best the amusing discussion of more obvious and universal matters. Immediately after the Restoration, they had, indeed, made few demands on the world of letters, being apparently content, after the long years of civil disorder, with as complete an isolation from literature as from public affairs. But it was not long till they were called from their intellectual seclusion by the renewed attacks of the king on church and state; and, once stirred by the satire of *Absalom and Achitophel*, these honest Englishmen were ready, first to venture somewhat further in a literature that clasped hands with politics, and then to follow the lead of the essayist into regions hitherto unexplored by them. In the beginning, however, the chasm that divided would-be polite

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readers from polite writers was still incredibly wide: there existed between the two neither a range of common interests nor any established medium of communication. But though they were for the moment far apart, the means for bringing them together was not far to seek, the daily press having, in however primitive fashion, already established a connection between the venders and the buyers of news.

In this state of affairs, a series of "projects," or of what we might to-day in more high-sounding language call fortunate journalistic ventures, opened the way for the further development of the essay by pressing literature into the service of the newspapers. John Dunton, in 1690, established the *Athenian Gazette*, the title of which was changed in the second number to the *Athenian Mercury*, a paper proposing to answer all questions of correspondents and actually covering a very wide range of subjects. In 1704 Defoe founded his *Review*, in which vigorous discussion of public affairs and the famous Scandal Club's censure of manners and morals marked a distinct advance both toward the popularity of the essay and toward a more literary quality in the journal. And finally in the *Tatler*, founded in 1709, and the *Spectator*, established two years later, Steele and Addison, among the foremost literary artists of the day, annexed a new province to literature by publishing in the periodical journal short informal essays on general subjects, through which they set out to please or interest a still wider circle of readers.

The newspaper, which Dunton was first to use in the service of the general reader, had long been moving toward that affiliation with literature which was finally assured by the establishment of the *Spectator*. Whether we count its history as beginning in 1622, with the publication of the *Weekly Newes, from Italy, Germanie, Hungeria, etc.*, the first paper regularly issued in England, or trace it to the accounts of some particular exciting event circulated through the early broadsheets and newsletters, there can be no doubt that the newspaper had its origin in the desire to tell or to learn what was going on in the

world. News — first from foreign parts, and later, of domestic affairs — filled the newsbooks, the newspamphlets and the newspapers, which, in spite of all obstacles, increased steadily after 1622 and multiplied exceedingly during the years of civil strife. The innumerable Mercuries and Gazettes which carried news through the three kingdoms were in most ways insignificant enough: they were all small and badly printed, their titles changed from number to number, and designated rather the subject of chief interest than the name of the paper; their publishers were remorselessly prosecuted on the smallest occasion by whatever party was in power. Yet these apparently insignificant sheets, ephemeral, rudely printed and hardly distinguishable from the earlier pamphlets and newsbooks, had already, before the middle of the seventeenth century, taken on the character of politician and preacher as well as of news-monger. Cromwell recognized their power as shapers of public opinion by undertaking the official publication of news. Charles the Second followed, and improved upon, his example by the establishment of authorized news-organs and by a practically prohibitive censorship of other publications.

In spite of these efforts of the parties in power to officialize the newspaper, it gained steadily in the vitality of its relation to its readers. Sir Roger L'Estrange, an uncommonly versatile writer who had supported the Royalists through all their misfortunes, was in 1662 appointed one of the licensers of the press, and later one of the supervisors of printing. After carrying on several papers, always loyal in their support of the government, he founded the *Observator* in 1681 to defend the court against charges of popery. A journalist of great ability, he saw the advantage, in a time when party feeling ran high, of putting his case vividly before the public, and so decided to enliven the scanty matter that he was allowed to print by throwing it into the form of questions and answers. The reason for this departure, as explained in the *Preface* to the first volume of the *Observator*, involves a recognition of the duty of the press, if it is to guide public opinion, not only to set forth

facts but to appeal to the emotions and the intelligence of its readers. "The *Common people*," he says, "are *Poyson'd* and will run *Stark Mad* if they be not *Cur'd*: Offer them *Reason*, without *Fooling*, and it will never *Down* with them: And give them *Fooling*, without *Argument*, they're never the *Better* for 't. Let 'em *Alone* and All's *Lost*. So that the *Mixture* is become as *Necessary* as the *Office*; And it has been *My Part* only to *Season* the *One* with the *Other*."<sup>1</sup> The modern reader seldom finds the folly of the *Observator* amusing or its argument convincing; but in L'Estrange's various addresses to "*the Ignorant, the Seditious, or the Schismatical Reader*," there is a vigor and finish that mark an epoch in newspaper style.

Among the influences constantly making for the more effective presentation of news in the papers was the newsletter, which, being uncensored, could deal more freely with current events, and was, during these formative years, even more widely circulated than the printed journals. The newsletter, possibly the original of the later newspaper and certainly flourishing before it, is known to have existed in the reign of Elizabeth, and, as general interest in politics deepened, took an increasingly important place in the life of the time. Lords, country squires, provincial merchants, every one at all connected with public affairs, kept a regular correspondent in London or arranged to get private news from some trustworthy source; while those who cared particularly for the gossip of the city found the general newsletter at once more racy and more authentic than the supervised papers. In the years after the Restoration, when the censorship was especially severe and interest in the social doings of London very strong, the newsletter was the best possible means for bringing Englishmen into touch with the capital.

Though in the nature of the case few newsletters are now accessible, there is sufficient testimony both to their wide popularity and to their power in forming public opinion. Sir Roger L'Estrange, in the second *Preface* to the *Observator*, declared

<sup>1</sup> "To the Reader," *Observator*, vol. I.

that the seditious were keeping "the People *Warm*, and *Waking*: with *Libells*, and *News-Letters*; *Seditious Doctrines*; *False Rumours*, and *Diabolical Slanders*."<sup>1</sup> The Tory fox-hunter of the *Freeholder* said that he made it a rule never to believe the printed news, and that he never saw how things were going, except now and then in Dyer's Letter.<sup>2</sup> Far into the eighteenth century, references to the newsletters testify to their strong hold on the affections of their readers. The attempt of the news-writer to discover interesting material made him the archetype of the modern reporter, and there can be no question that his more vigorous style and fresher point of view, even when he took an unscrupulous license with facts, pleased his readers far better than the tame and meager accounts of the licensed papers.

The taste of the public, brought up on the newsletters and embryonic newspapers of the seventeenth century and beginning to be curious about literature and science as well as about politics and religion, was as yet an unknown quantity when in 1690 Dunton began the *Athenian Gazette*, or *Mercury*. This journal not only set out to offer a wider range of entertainment to men of business and leisure, but, what was much more important, actually discovered the subjects and points of view in which its middle-class readers were interested. It was published during six years, and was from the first exceedingly popular. Nor was its popularity confined to those to whom it was particularly addressed. Dunton testifies that "that great and learned nobleman, the late Marquis of Halifax" once told him that he "constantly perused our Mercuries,"<sup>3</sup> and that "so great a Judge as the late Sir William Temple was pleas'd not only to approve of the Work, but to Honour the *Athenian Society*, the Authors of it, with frequent Letters and Curious Questions, and to express his satisfaction in their answers."<sup>4</sup> Swift contributed at least one ode to it, and sent

<sup>1</sup> Vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> No. 22, March 5, 1716.

<sup>3</sup> *Life and Errors*, ed. 1818, vol. I, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> "Dedication, *Athenian Oracle*, ed. 1703, vol. I, p. 2.

with this ode a characteristic letter to the Athenian Society.<sup>1</sup> This Athenian Society, introduced in the *Athenian Mercury* as answering questions, gave the idea of the Scandal Club to Defoe, and later the plan of the *Tatler* to Steele. The whole idea of the paper seems to have been original with Dunton, for though L'Estrange had preceded him in the use of question and answer, he had used them as mere rhetorical devices, while Dunton received questions on all subjects and answered them in what were sometimes almost essays. The questions bring us close to the readers of the day, reminding those familiar with the answers to correspondents in our present-day papers that, though fashions change, human nature remains much the same. The replies, ranging from considerations, facetious or serious, of lovers' problems to scientific explanations of the simpler sort, already show something of the scope of the later periodical essay.

Though Dunton was a valiant pioneer in the new field, there was still another experiment to be tried before the press entered into its final alliance with literature. Fourteen years after the establishment of the *Athenian*, Defoe began his famous *Review*. The most inventive of thinkers among the writers of his time, and the most prolific in the number and importance of his literary projects, he made his *Review* significant in the double development of the press and of the essay, on the one hand by taking up in it the informal discussion of current questions, and on the other by using the reports of the Scandal Club as a means of social satire and criticism.

But Defoe, for all his genius, did not wholly succeed in establishing the journal for which his age was looking. With a knowledge of common life that made him a few years later the creator of the realistic novel, and with prophetic insight into many of the less evident tendencies of his time, he was yet by his political partisanship and his Puritanic morality shut out from sympathy with the polite world which was to be the controlling influence in the new essay-journal. The middle-

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. 1910, vol. 1, pp. 6-8.

class readers of the early eighteenth century turned in their search after pleasure and profit, not to the projector of novel ideas or to the student of real life, but to the discussions of clubs or coffee-houses in which were centered the social, intellectual, and moral movements of the time; and the men of letters, who were for the moment intermediaries between the social and political leaders and the wider public, anxious to form itself on them, were able to use the periodical essay, developed by several decades of experiment, as a means of communicating ideas and disseminating culture. Steele, prince of club-men and one of the most brilliant writers of his generation, demonstrated its social and literary possibilities by the publication of the *Tatler* from 1709 to 1711. But it was in the *Spectator*, jointly undertaken by Steele and Addison a few months after the *Tatler* had ceased to exist, that this type of essay finally found itself, at once achieving a perfection to which all previous attempts had vainly aspired and on which all future attempts were to form themselves.

The *Tatler* and *Spectator* were fortunate in that each of their principal authors impressed on it something of his own peculiar character. Steele, quickened to the perception by his office as government gazetteer, was the first to recognize the opportunities of a journal divorced entirely from politics, and thus free to treat non-partisan matters more adequately than had been done by its predecessors. In the first number of the *Tatler* he laid down the literary programme that was followed, not only by the *Tatler* itself and the *Spectator*, but by their innumerable successors in the eighteenth century. His intellectual qualities fitted him, moreover, to make his somewhat daring venture immediately successful. He was imaginative and inventive, constantly suggesting new subjects and treating them with the directness and feeling that made him, after Swift, the most interesting and forceful of the personalities of his time. And while Steele was, in freshness and vividness of perception, among the most gifted of journalists, Addison was essentially the critic and man of

letters. To the undertaking vigorously inaugurated by his friend, he brought wide scholarship, exquisite artistic sense, a humor unmatched in delicacy and playful kindness, a stability of purpose that from the beginning added weight to the common enterprise. Though each of these writers has left his individual mark on it, the periodical essay resulting from their joint effort is better than the work of either. Nor could a less powerful union have availed to make the best literature truly popular, and the journals through which the rank and file of readers were reached a means for expressing the more permanent and vital human interests.

But Addison and Steele did even more than this. In their hands the periodical essay quickly proved itself the distinctive literary instrument of its age, and as such wielded for a few years an influence parallel in its different sphere to that of the drama in the age of Elizabeth. Steele chose as the motto for the early *Tatlers*, "*Quicquid agunt homines nostri farrago libelli*," and, true to the spirit embodied in this motto, he and his coadjutors in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* ignored the interest or point of view of no possible class of readers. Addison's papers on *Chevy Chase* and *Paradise Lost* must have been eagerly watched for by the poets at Wills's and the learned men at the Grecian; and, elementary as were the aesthetic ideas of the author, his analysis of the nature and function of the imagination was no less significant in the history of critical theory than his discussion of epic and ballad. Subjects as technical as these were mingled with more popular themes, with criticisms of a new opera or of the latest fashion of head-dress, with dissertations on the prevalent treatment of servants or the evils of a false social pride. And even more characteristic of the periodical essays than this range of subject-matter was the simple, yet varied, style that brought their message home to a widening circle of readers. Lucidity, force, and delicate adequacy of expression were, indeed, general characteristics of the prose of the period; but nowhere else were these qualities so fused by the courteous ease that was

the ideal of a constituency still thoroughly aristocratic in its democracy.

Nor did the periodical essays represent the age only in the range of their interests and the social grace of their style: as the most direct medium of communication between the leaders of thought and their middle-class readers they readily lent themselves, through the popularizing of knowledge and the culture of taste, to the prevailing enthusiasm for reform. The essayist declares with almost wearisome iteration his intention to make right and right reason prevail; he can hardly tell a story without pointing the way to its moral. Nowhere is this ethical spirit more clearly evident than in the treatment of manners. In the study of this theme, a subject as absorbing to the age of Anne as "humours" had been to the later Elizabethans, the writers of the time paint us pictures unsurpassed in exquisite precision. But they do more: they pass beyond the portrayal of manners to an interpretation of their significance, making the discussion of them a means of revealing new values in human life and so of enlightening the minds and elevating the morals of their readers.

With the success of the *Spectator*, the periodical essay had not only found its audience, but had established as its characteristic manner that "peculiar intimacy with the public,"<sup>1</sup> inherited from the personal, revelatory essay of Montaigne, which has ever since been its infallible mark. The greatness of Steele's and Addison's achievement may to a degree be measured by the breadth and permanence of their influence. The new periodical essay had hardly shaped itself in their hands to the requirements of a news-reading, curious public, when the creative impulse of the century began to run in other lines: when Pope enriched poetry with the humane philosophy of his maturity, when Swift opened a new world of satire in *Gulliver*, when Defoe and Richardson and Fielding marked out in their realistic study of everyday life the course that modern fiction was in the main to follow. But though,

<sup>1</sup> Leigh Hunt, "Periodical Essays," *Examiner*, no. 2.

after Addison and Steele, the greatest work of the greatest writers of the century was done in other fields, there was hardly one of those writers who did not leave a record of himself in the periodical essay. Defoe, who had contributed only less than Addison and Steele to its formation, wrote later in the new fashion, and even, in the *Universal Spectator* in 1727, attempted to revive amidst its degenerate successors a worthy follower of the original *Spectator*. Swift found time, in spite of his absorption in politics, to write periodical essays unequalled in humor and vigor; and Pope, in his papers in the *Guardian*, discoursed at large, in essay-form, though hardly in the manner of the born essayist, on his literary and personal tastes.

An interesting adaptation of the periodical essay to practical purposes is seen in the *Free-Thinker*, started by Ambrose Philips in 1718 to propagate the liberal doctrines of the Whigs. To this end he sought, in the spirit of the *Spectator*, to inculcate correct habits of thought rather than directly to uphold his political doctrines. He devoted much space to the foibles of beaux and belles, and was especially liberal in his attention to the ladies, since he hoped, he said, "in the End to get them upon the Level with my own Sex, in our boasted Superiority of Reason."<sup>1</sup> But the whole tone of the papers is more than usually serious in its playfulness. Accepting as his fundamental principle the necessity of that freedom of thought to which he regarded his country and party as pledged, he repeatedly turned from a criticism of some fashionable folly to urge the necessity to progress of a right curiosity; or to insist upon the need of strenuous thought among men who in spite of reputed intelligence can stand "both for Maxims in Politics, and for Doctrines in Religion, which are directly opposite";<sup>2</sup> or to praise the excellence of the disposition, open-minded and without touch of fanaticism, that makes for true liberty. But in spite of his seriousness, the *Free-Thinker* seldom forgot that he was making "Philosophy the Amusement of Coffee Houses, Tea Tables, and Assemblies," and so if he did not speak like a man of the

<sup>1</sup> *Free-Thinker*, no. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 10.

world, would run the danger "of loosing that Freedom of Temper which distinguishes a Sociable Philosopher from a Cynick."<sup>1</sup>

The influence of the *Spectator* upon succeeding generations was even more marked than upon its contemporaries. Its manner, indeed, ruled the eighteenth century, and, with a difference, remained a moving power in the nineteenth. Of the age of Johnson and Goldsmith, it is hardly too much to say that all its writers were occasionally periodical essayists. Johnson not only enrolled himself among them but even pressed into the service of the *Rambler* his friend Richardson and four ladies, whose names are now hardly a memory. Fielding, a constant dabbler in journalism, discoursed in the *Covent Garden Journal* on many subjects; the papers on criticism, hypocrisy and taste — which last he derived from "a nice harmony between the imagination and the judgment"<sup>2</sup> — being perhaps the most characteristic. Cowper the solitary, and Lord Chesterfield the worldly, contributed to the *Connoisseur*; and the *World* boasted essays by Horace Walpole. In the following century writers innumerable, from Irving to Stevenson, made the *Spectator* their model. Hazlitt's first important contribution to literature was the *Round Table*, papers written for the *Examiner* "in the manner of the early periodical essayists, the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*."<sup>3</sup> Leigh Hunt, introducing himself in the same paper only a few years earlier, had traced his pedigree past Goldsmith and the "melancholy *Rambler*," to Addison, the earliest and the most original of the essayists on whom he patterned himself.<sup>4</sup>

The periodical essays of the eighteenth century are delightful reading, full of wit, and picturing the life of their time with only less intimacy than do the letters of Walpole, Gray and Lady Mary Wortley Montague. Yet, with all the charm of the

<sup>1</sup> *Free-Thinker*, nos. 23, 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Covent Garden Journal*, no. 10, *Works*, ed. 1871, vol. x, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> "Advertisement to the *Round Table*," ed. 1817, *Works*, ed. 1902-4, vol. i, p. xxxi.

<sup>4</sup> "Periodical Essays," *Examiner*, no. 2.

writers in this period, only two of them, Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith, have left us essays marked with peculiar individuality and power. Antipodal at every point to the facile Goldsmith, whose humor and tact kept the severest subjects from more than a touch of gravity, was the weighty-worded doctor, who, "notable truth-teller though he was," could not always resist making his little fishes talk like great whales. At first sight too dogmatic and serious-minded for so light and flexible a fashion of writing, he had yet the good sense and firm grasp of facts that are the essayist's first gifts, and all his contributions to periodicals, from the time when he began to write for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, are marked by the integrity, moral and intellectual, that makes him the commanding personality of his generation. The *Rambler*, undertaken when the *Dictionary* was still unfinished, and before his position in literary London was fully assured, suggests by its somber reflections and sonorous style his indomitable spirit. The *Idler*, written eight years later, after he had finished his great task, and after the *Connoisseur* and the *World* had tuned the essay-manner to the social key of their own day, shows him in more conventional but hardly in happier vein. Each series of essays has its peculiar charm; the grim humor of *The Advantages of Living in a Garret*, and the undertone of heroic endurance in *Literary Courage*, though more characteristic of the author, are hardly finer than the inimitable portrait of Dick Minim, which, while conforming to literary fashion, shows to the full Johnson's power of seeing and portraying personality. Yet, last as first, Johnson's essays have a touch of arrogance and weighty dignity which somewhat overburdens so familiar a form of writing: they are great because the author has overcome in them the difficulties of an alien medium rather than because that medium inevitably lent itself to his purpose.

Goldsmith, on the other hand, was from the first at home in the chatty informality of the periodical essay. In his use of it to open up new lines of speculation, as well as in his wide range of interests and his highly wrought sensibility, he resembled

Steele, the great essay-journalist of the earlier generation. Of all the essay-writers of the later eighteenth century, he was, indeed, the most sensitive to the moulding social forces of his time, the most conscious of that spirit of the morrow which gives a touch of prophecy to the literature of to-day. The experiences of his early life, though they were the result of his own character and temperament, turned the Bohemianism that was his by nature into some understanding of the main currents of European thought. Restless from his youth, and ever impelled to see or hear some new thing, he had, in spite of poverty, traveled much on the continent before he settled in London at the age of twenty-seven; and this knowledge of foreign countries, won with a light-hearted endurance thoroughly characteristic of him, made him the effective spokesman in England of the cosmopolitanism which in the years before the French Revolution was breaking down the boundaries of national prejudices in Europe. With such a disposition and training, Goldsmith inevitably differed from Johnson, not only in the phases of contemporary life with which he dealt, but in the spirit with which he treated them; he was as free from national prejudices as Johnson was full of them, was as truly cosmopolitan in feeling as Johnson was an Englishman and a Londoner. In an early essay he declared that if it were necessary to hate other countries in order to love one's own, he would "prefer the title of the ancient philosopher, viz., a citizen of the world, to that of an Englishman, a Frenchman, or European, or to any other appellation whatever."<sup>1</sup> It was thus as the expression of a long-established point of view that he chose *The Citizen of the World* as the title for a series of essays published in the *Ledger*, and made his *Spectator* a Chinese philosopher already thoroughly familiar with the life of Europe. Through this censor, provided with a disinterested as well as a novel point of view, he was able to represent, not only the new enthusiasm for humanity, but the sensibility and realism that were everywhere mani-

<sup>1</sup> "Essay on National Prejudices," *Miscellaneous Works*, ed. 1867, vol. 1, p. 232.

festing themselves as forces to be reckoned with. These qualities are, indeed, hardly less conspicuous in his essays than in his poems and novels: the pathos that overshadows *The Deserted Village* is not wanting in *A City Night-Piece*; the Man in Black is of the same family as Dr. Primrose; and the humor that pictures the absurdities of Moses inspires the portrait of Beau Tibbs.

The eighteenth-century readers who amused their leisure with the *Spectator* or the *Connoisseur* turned in their serious hours to the critical essay with its more thorough treatment of weightier subjects. For the critical essay, though far behind the periodical in brilliancy and popularity, had in the eighteenth century an interesting history of its own. It was, to be sure, singularly slow in development. Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesie* — or, as its original title reads, *Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay* — was published more than fifty years before the *Tatler*; yet not until the beginning of the nineteenth century did the critical essay rival the periodical in social influence. But the years lying between these more glorious epochs of its history were rich in experiments, and the essays written in them, though little known to-day, reflected every phase of public opinion and popular taste.

In an age preëminently political, the political essay naturally held the first place; and Addison, Swift, Philips and Fielding were but a few of those who used it to support their parties or their principles. The social enthusiasm then rapidly developing showed itself in a multitude of essays, dealing with reforms in education or literature, in politics or society, among which Defoe's *Essay on Projects* is perhaps the most famous. Particularly evident was the literary curiosity of the new reading public, athirst for knowledge, and, in spite of its strongly practical bent, eager to make its own the world of books that had been hitherto accessible only to the learned. The literary essay thus became the interpreter of the scholarship and taste of the day. The essay-preface, already made illustrious by Dryden's use, lent itself to the

different tasks of Pope and Johnson; Fielding introduced into his novels, as preface or essay-interlude, a form of the critical essay in which he familiarly discussed the mysteries of his craft; more pedestrian scholarship threw its bulky studies into works like Spence's *Essay on Pope's Odyssey* or Joseph Warton's two-volume *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*.

But the most characteristic of the critical essays of the century were inspired not by the burning issues of politics, not by the alluring schemes of reformers, not even by the world of literature that was opening more widely both to the general reader and to the scholar: they were rather the outcome of that practical philosophy of life, with its passion for reason and for humanity, that is the distinctive mark of the age of enlightenment. Nowhere does this temper find better expression than in the volume published in 1711 by Lord Shaftesbury, under the title *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Essays in fact even when thrown into the form of letter or reflections, these discussions of wit, or humor, or enthusiasm, or the conditions of authorship, take us into the innermost circle of the gentlemen-thinkers, who, in the days of Addison and Swift, were forming the ideas of coming generations. They are, indeed, the very incarnation of that ardent faith in intellectual liberty, tempered into courtesy by the decorous ordering of life, that animated the best thinking of the time. Their plea for freedom of discussion; for a goodness, human or divine, that conforms to law; for the beauty of intellectual and spiritual sanity; for a noble virtuosoship in morality, carries the thought backward to Montaigne and Plato as well as forward to the nineteenth century. Their largeness of vision and fervency of conviction lose little and gain much from the fact that *Characteristics* was written by a gentleman for gentlemen, and thus professedly voiced the ideal of a coterie rather than that of humanity. By establishing the essential principles that should prevail in a society whose members are truly equal and free, these essays were able not only to embody the best social philosophy of their day, but, by liberat-

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ing this philosophy from the limitations of a too immediate application, to establish a more perfect conception of democracy than was possible in the actual society of that time.

The critical essay, in its development during this hundred years, repeated in a particular field the history of the essay of the seventeenth century. Though established in general use, it had not yet clearly recognized its function or wholly succeeded in finding its audience; it was, in fact, only partially socialized, and so lost itself in experiment, toiled rather than achieved. The strength of the spirit that was framing for itself this new medium of communication appeared more clearly in other and apparently unrelated fields of literature, where, however unexpectedly, it proved itself the controlling power. For the rational, disinterested temper that naturally finds expression in the essay passed for the time beyond what might by any license be considered its proper sphere, and infused with something of its own distinctive quality writings the most remote from it in character and aim. It would certainly be an unwarranted stretching of terms to include either Locke's *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* or Pope's *Essay on Man* in a discussion of the essay proper. But the title as well as the method of Locke's greatest work suggests the close connection existing between the essay and the skeptical, philosophic point of view so characteristic of the time. The adoption of the essay-method for his most important poem by the greatest poet of the age is even more significant. Whether the result is or is not poetry, this couplet-discussion of great themes furnishes the best possible illustration of the dominance in every age of the prevailing attitude of mind over the most diverse forms of literature. For the essay in going beyond its own boundaries and usurping the functions of other literary types was but seeking a wider expression for the essentially scientific, critical and rational spirit of the early eighteenth century. In the universal insistence upon law, and, in the social sphere, upon conduct, attention was for the moment concentrated on the more evident and

demonstrable aspects of experience, so comparatively easy of classification. The widening of the intellectual horizon on one side had meant the closing in of it on another; and in enthusiasm for the new world of rational endeavor and moral conquest, the mysteries of existence, whether in the outer world or in man's inner experience, were for the time almost forgotten. A conception of life at once simple and objective, social and utilitarian, conditioned all the intellectual and æsthetic activities of the period, subduing even poetry to its prevailing rationalism. Pope's poetic essays or essay-poems thus form the natural and illuminating counterpart of the so-called prose-poetry of DeQuincey, and even, in the final analysis, of the imaginative prose of Bacon and Sidney.

The charges oftenest brought against the essays, periodical or critical, of the eighteenth century, are the obviousness and triteness of their thoughts. Yet these undeniable faults are in no small degree the result of a modernness of subject and point of view that makes their over-familiar ideas part and parcel of the life of to-day. Shaftesbury's plea for freedom of discussion among thinkers found its counterpart in John Stuart Mill's thesis that universal liberty of speech is the foundation of social progress. Goldsmith's ideal of a culture freed from narrowing national prejudice closely paralleled Arnold's more modern cosmopolitanism. The many demands for the better education of women distinctly foreshadowed Mill's declaration of their political rights and Meredith's conception of an ideal society enslaved neither by convention nor by sensuality. Pope's insistence that genius delights in nature while "the little necessities and fantastical operations of art"<sup>1</sup> are pleasing to "people of the common level of understanding" is but one of the several ties that connect him with the more romantic period that followed. An even deeper likeness is suggested by Ruskin, who says that the serene and just benevolence of Pope's theology placed him two centuries in advance of his time, and that his couplet—

<sup>1</sup> *Guardian*, no. 173.

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"Never elated, while one man 's oppress'd,  
Never dejected, while another 's bless'd" —

sums up "the law of noble life" and gives "the most complete, the most concise and the most lofty expression of moral temper existing in English words."<sup>1</sup> These many similarities in point of view between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth are not mere coincidences, but rather the outcome of a way of looking at life in which these ages are at one. Over-simple as are the generalizations of the early essayists, we yet see in them abundant illustrations of John Richard Green's statement that from the time of the Restoration we find ourselves in the great currents of thought and activity which have ever since gone on widening and deepening, but have not essentially changed their direction.<sup>2</sup>

The success of the newspaper proper and of the periodical essay moved publishers and writers in the eighteenth century to incessant efforts to reach the reading public. In its very beginning the problem of communication between writer and reader seemed to have been in great measure solved. Ambrose Philips wrote in 1718: "Of all the methods which have yet been practiced to inform Mankind, and to convey Wisdom and Knowledge to the Multitude, that of throwing out short Lectures from the Press upon Stated Days is by far more effectual and more convenient, than any other."<sup>3</sup> But though the *Tatler*, the *Spectator* and their successors had met the need of the moment, they were but pioneers; and their great but simple experiment, itself made possible by a century of effort, was to be followed by another hundred years of ingenious adaptation to more complex conditions before the power of the press over popular thought could even be guessed at. The necessity for the further development of periodical literature is, of course, to-day perfectly evident. The essays, though treating of many subjects and representing widely different points of view, were

<sup>1</sup> "Relation of Art to Morals," *Lectures on Art*, ed. 1886, vol. viii, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the English People*, ed. 1878-80, vol. iii, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> *Free-Thinker*, no. 23.

originally issued as single articles printed separately, depending for variety wholly on the proper succession of topics. Under the double stimulus of popularity and cheapness of production, these papers, moreover, multiplied rapidly; and the consequent confusion and waste of time for the reader was offset by no great profit or glory for the writer.

But though the desirability of larger and more varied periodicals is to-day evident enough, it was not until 1731 that a successful publication of a new type was established. In that year Edward Cave began the *Gentleman's Magazine*, "a collection or magazine," which was to bring together the interesting matter contained in the two hundred half-sheets which were thrown off monthly by the London press and the equal number which were printed elsewhere in the three kingdoms.<sup>1</sup> But the publisher-editor did more than this, adding to the reviews of important papers, which took something less than half his space, a brief survey of remarkable transactions, a few pages of poetry, a catalogue of books published in the month, and such minor matters as observations on gardening and a gardener's calendar. In its second year parliamentary reports were incorporated in the magazine, Doctor Johnson for a time preparing them for publication, if he did not himself act as a reporter. There is some question whether Cave may rightly be considered the inventor of the magazine, as the *Gentleman's Journal* or the *Monthly Miscellany*, begun just forty years earlier, anticipated the *Gentleman's Magazine* in its general plan.<sup>2</sup> But if Cave has not the undisputed honor of originating the maga-

<sup>1</sup> The following passage is suggestive of the nature and purposes of the magazine: —

"It has been unexceptionably advanced, that a good Abridgment of the Law is more intelligible than the Statutes at large: so a nice Model is as entertaining as the Original, and a true Specimen as satisfactory as the whole Parcel: This may serve to illustrate the Reasonableness of our present Undertaking, which in the first place is to give Monthly a View of all the Pieces of Wit, Humour, or Intelligence, daily offer'd to the Publick in the News-papers, (which of late are so multiply'd, as to render it impossible, unless a man makes it a business, to consult them all) and in the next place we shall join therewith some other matters of Use or Amusement that will be communicated to us." Introd., vol. I.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Haney, *Early Reviews of English Poets*, ed. 1904, Introd., xv.

zine, he was the first to establish it in popular favor and to give it the name by which it has ever since been known. Indeed, the *Gentleman's Magazine* seems exactly to have hit the taste of the day. Doctor Johnson says in the *Preface* for 1738 that its success had "given Rise to almost twenty Imitations of it, which are either all dead, or very little regarded by the World."<sup>1</sup>

These "imitations" of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, of which Doctor Johnson spoke so scornfully, though inferior in almost every case to the original, increased rapidly in number and importance. Separate magazines were early established for ladies, which, though they provided for the domestic and frivolous interests of their readers, did not wholly give up the attempt of the *Spectator* and the *Free-Thinker* to raise the sex to the same level with men in the "boasted superiority of reason." The contents of these magazines — with their abbreviated political news, their substitution of romances and moral essays for general articles, and their lengthy reports of marriages, births and deaths — serve chiefly to mark the chasm that still separated the interests of men and women in the eighteenth century. Yet they seem to have met a very real need of their readers, who, if we may judge from a letter published in the *Lady's Magazine* in 1773, fervently appreciated their double purpose: "You *first* and *only* you," says the writer, "thought the ornaments of the species worthy of being made more ornamental by cultivating their understandings at the same time as you presented them with rules to preserve, though not to sophisticate, their personal charms."<sup>2</sup> But the special magazine for women was in those early days something of an exception, editors and publishers generally attempting to offer something to every one rather than to reach any particular class of readers exclusively. The encyclopædic subject-matter of these "collections" is well illustrated in the title and contents of the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, which advertised twenty-one departments, ranging from news and gardening to philosophy and mathematics, and including

<sup>1</sup> Vol. viii, 1738.

<sup>2</sup> Feb., p. 64.

all the arts and sciences which might make it "Instructive and Entertaining to Gentry, Merchants, Farmers and Tradesmen."<sup>1</sup> Almost every subject was, in fact, discussed in the pages of the eighteenth-century magazine, only fiction being regarded as unworthy of its dignity.

The magazine, because of its affiliation with the newspaper and the character of its readers, was from the first political and practical in tone; it was written for gentlemen, tradesmen, and farmers rather than for scholars or men of letters, and so naturally treated of books somewhat perfunctorily and incidentally. The review, representing especially the interests of learning and literature, though of earlier origin, was somewhat later in development. The *Journal des Scavans*, published at Paris in 1665, was, according to J. L. Haney, the first purely literary journal. It was followed in 1684 by Pierre Bayle's *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, and probably suggested the publication in England in 1670 of a newsbook, of which but a single copy is extant, entitled the *Mercurius Librarius; or a Catalogue of Books Printed and Published at London (1668-70)*. The first real English review, consisting largely of translations from the French *Journal*, was, however, issued in 1682-1683 under the title *The Weekly Memorial for the Ingenious: or an Account of Books lately set forth in Several Languages, with some other Curious Novelties relating to Arts and Sciences*.

It was as the successor of such scholarly magazines as these, mostly collections of ponderous dissertations, that Ralph Griffith in 1749 published his *Monthly Review*. This review, described by its sub-title as a "Periodical Work, giving an Account, with proper Abstracts of, and Extracts from, the New Books, Pamphlets, &c. as they come out," was extraordinarily popular, and in 1756 was followed by the rival *Critical Review*. But though Goldsmith spent five unhappy years writing for the one, and though Smollett was for a time editor of the other, the reviewers of the eighteenth century were for the most part

<sup>1</sup> No. 1, 1747.

dull guides of patient readers. It was a common belief that these journals were managed in the interests of publishers, a belief not materially weakened by the advertisement of the *Critical* that it was conducted "by a Society of Gentlemen." Yet with their many shortcomings, they carried to the rank and file of readers a knowledge of books otherwise unattainable, and in them the criticism of literature and ideas as such became for the first time a subject of general concern.<sup>1</sup>

The relation of newspaper and journal to the essay of the time, though hard to trace, appears in many ways. The newspapers had been at first content to report and comment on news, leaving questions of manners and morals to the essayists. Gradually, however, they came to regard the periodical essay, or perhaps more accurately the essay-periodical, as a regular part of their contents. The *Idler*, for instance, was published as a series of essays in the *Universal Chronicle*, and the *Citizen of the World* in the *Ledger*. A wider audience was thus offered to men of letters; and the character of this audience determined their writing both indirectly and directly. The Englishmen of the day were notably given to substantial reading, a fact witnessed to by the comments of thoughtful observers, by the number of pamphlets and papers of all sorts that were constantly issued, and by the steady growth of the magazine, which, except for an occasional poem or familiar essay, confined itself to serious subjects. Their interest in the printed page, closely parallel in many respects to that of their grandfathers in the seventeenth century, was extending over many and diverse fields. Doctor Johnson, writing of the "fugitive pieces" then in circulation, traced their wide variety of character and humor to the freedom and independence which allowed every Englishman to inquire at will into political and religious matters,<sup>2</sup> and in the *Idler* described England as "a

<sup>1</sup> For the material in the two foregoing paragraphs I am indebted largely to J. L. Haney's Introduction to *Early Reviews of English Poets*, ed. 1904, pp. xiii-xx.

<sup>2</sup> "Essay on . . . Small Tracts and Fugitive Pieces," *Literary Pamphlets*, ed. 1897, vol. 1, pp. 43-4.

nation of authors," asserting that at that time the passion for writing had seized old and young alike; that the cook was warbling her lyrics in the kitchen and the thrasher vociferating his heroics in the barn, that traders were dealing out knowledge in bulky volumes and girls forsaking their samplers to teach kingdoms wisdom.<sup>1</sup> This shrewd, though satiric, characterization, which seems far more appropriate to our day than to his own, reminds us that the English nation had even then entered upon an era of intellectual democracy, and that democracy was proving its vitality by the constantly increasing coöperation of the many in the creation of literature.

The strength of the many forces that had long been preparing for the fuller development of the essay became clearly evident in the years following the French Revolution, when by its means questions of politics and society, of literature and religion, were brought directly before the bar of popular judgment. The dominating type of essay was, however, at this time, not the short essay of manners which had pleased the readers of Addison and Steele, but the popular critical essay, which, whether informal or formal in method, undertakes the more exhaustive treatment of special or technical subjects. The critical essay was in this phase of its development as demonstrably related to the demands of its readers as the earlier periodical essay had been a hundred years before. Hazlitt, reviewing periodical literature for the *Edinburgh* in 1823, noted that the style of common conversation had lately changed from the personal and piquant to the critical and didactic, while the more polished circles, instead of aiming at elegant raillery or pointed repartee, were discussing general topics and analyzing abstract problems. With this marked shifting of interest among readers the time was ripe for the critical essay to emerge from its pedestrian history in the eighteenth century into a more brilliant period of development. Its special opportunity is defined by Hazlitt as the conveying of knowledge from the specialist to the lay-public, which, if it was not

<sup>1</sup> *Idler*, no. 2.

learned, at least cared to know. "We have," he declared, "collected a superabundance of raw materials: the grand *desideratum* now is, to fashion and render them portable. Knowledge is no longer confined to the few: the object therefore is, to make it accessible and attractive to the many."<sup>1</sup> This recognition of the many as eager for the information and ideas of the educated rather than for the wit and wisdom of the well-bred carries our thoughts back to the essay-readers of earlier generations; to the aristocrats and scholars for whom Bacon primarily wrote, to the ladies and gentlemen to whom Dryden so courteously deferred, to the would-be-polite squires and merchants — with a sprinkling of their wives and daughters — for whom Steele and Addison set out to make instruction agreeable. When the general reader had at last come to be interested in "discussing general topics and analyzing abstract problems," it was inevitable that the critical essay should not only become a universal medium of communication, but that, in order to meet the new demands made upon it, it should undergo an entire change in scope and style.

The conception that the chief function of the modern essay was to popularize knowledge came at a significant time. In 1800, two years before the *Edinburgh Review* was founded, Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* had declared the subject-matter of poetry to consist of those elementary emotions and universal passions in which alone the race is at one. Disputable as was his contention that these essential experiences of mankind are the especial birthright of the poor, he clearly voiced the demand of his age for an art dealing with those activities and sympathies which are fundamental in any genuine society. While poetry was thus defining as its special province what we may call the common stock of experience, the essay was zealously endeavoring to render knowledge "portable," to enrich the average reader with the intellectual wealth that had hitherto belonged solely to the scholar. This difference in aim and material is reflected in the contrast between

<sup>1</sup> "The Periodical Press," *Works*, ed. 1902-4, vol. x, pp. 207-10.

the simple language on which the new poetry would insist and the involved style of the new essay. Where the one ostentatiously boasts the speech of everyday life, the other is armed in all the panoply of a literary vocabulary. The manner of the essay at this time is, indeed, at first sight curiously at variance with its professed democracy of purpose; as the more informal and familiar type yielded in popular favor to the "brief treatise" and "short dissertation," the simple colloquial English that had been its glory was in great part supplanted by the phraseology of books. For this change several reasons suggest themselves: the new independence of men of letters, hardly achieved after two generations of struggle, tempted them to speak as those having authority rather than with the ease of good-fellowship; the romantic worship of genius, the mark of the early nineteenth century, perhaps served to justify an oracular arrogance of manner. But the literary language of the review essay could never have established itself in popular use unless readers and writers alike had been interested in the discussion of themes which encouraged, if they did not require, the "grey" vocabulary of generalization, the involved sentence and the long paragraph of abstract thought. Nor was this tendency, though at first sight lamentable, ultimately bad. If the result was, on the one hand, the formalization of style, and what Coleridge lamented as the "plebification of knowledge," it meant, on the other, that the thinker's point of view, as well as his vocabulary, was introduced into the lives of ordinary people.

The first strong impulse toward the creation of the nineteenth-century essay was given by the foundation of the great reviews. Of these, the *Edinburgh Review*, begun in 1802, was the earliest and the most important. Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith and Henry Brougham, young Liberals who under the strong Tory government of the time had small chance of obtaining place or power, were then living in Edinburgh, and, moved by a chance suggestion of Sydney Smith's, resolved one memorable evening to found a periodical through which they

might bring their ideas before the public. These young writers, popularly recognized as scholars and gentlemen, at once raised the *Edinburgh Review* above the reproach of commercial domination under which its predecessors had suffered; and, dull as their style and argument may seem to the modern reader, speedily made the new journal a powerful organ for directing opinion. Its success provoked Gifford in 1807 to establish the *Quarterly* as the mouthpiece of the Tories, and in 1817 *Blackwood's* was founded in order more effectually to confute the liberalism of the *Edinburgh* and the radicalism of the *Examiner*.

The purpose and scope of these publications is nowhere stated more clearly than in the review of the *Edinburgh* which appeared in 1824 in the first number of the *Westminster*. James Mill, the spokesman of the Benthamites, by whom the *Westminster* was founded, called attention in this article to the immense power wielded by these journals, declaring that under the guise of reviewing books they had "introduced the practice of publishing dissertations not only upon the topics of the day, but upon all the most important questions of morals and legislation in the most extensive acceptation of the term." The radical critic, however, admitted the widespread influence of the reviews only to deprecate their use of it, judging orthodox reviewers of both schools to be but blind leaders of public opinion, content to reflect and intensify the prejudices of their own age rather than to enlarge or to rectify its ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Mill's judgment was echoed nearly fifty years later by Matthew Arnold, who noted the significant fact that England, while it had organs for the dissemination of as much truth as might appeal to Catholic, or Liberal, or Churchman, had no review to aid those who were bent on the disinterested search for truth.<sup>2</sup> But this condition of affairs was far more marked in the years immediately following the French Revolution, when national prejudices were accepted as the only patriotism, and

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 1, p. 206 ff.

<sup>2</sup> "The Function of Criticism," *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, ed. 1903, pp. 19-20.

the utmost dream of liberalism reached little further than a change of party. The early reviewers perfectly embodied this national spirit of reactionary self-satisfaction: however Liberal and Tory differed as to immediate policy, they agreed to assume as fundamental the existing codes and institutions of their day. Regarding the English Constitution, the English Church, and the traditional literary canons of England as her bulwarks of righteousness, they became, by the very logic of their narrow convictions, the bitter antagonists of everything that savored of reform, or that was, however remotely, associated with radicalism. Their gentlemanly acceptance of the accepted, their timidity when confronted with anything original, is clearly seen in the field of literary criticism. The attacks on Wordsworth and Keats and Shelley and Byron are the most familiar instances of their mistakes in judgment. But their attitude toward these singers of a dawning day, based as it was on a genuine belief that the standards of poetry had been fixed at some earlier time and could no longer be called in question, is of importance far less because of the justice or injustice of particular opinions than because it was characteristic of a temper that used knowledge and taste solely to support existing views, and, in its effort to prove the validity of English institutions, turned the essay for a time into a superior sort of party-bludgeon.

The early reviewers, too deeply absorbed in the conventions of their age to penetrate into its spirit, are, in spite of the vigor of much of their writing, singularly remote from us to-day. But though they have passed, or are passing, into the limbo of the forgotten, they were, for evil and good, among the shaping forces of their century. On the one hand, their timid conservatism and provinciality of judgment, providing mediocrity with a formula for its inarticulate prejudices, did hardly less to delay general understanding of new ideas than to discredit the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, and their fellows. On the other hand, the elegance of Jeffrey, the personal charm of Sydney Smith, the genial buoyancy of John Wilson, even the savage vigor of

Gifford, created a literary tradition that gave dignity to English periodical writing.

The mantle of the early reviewers fell, moreover, on a successor greater than any of them: for Thomas Babington Macaulay, perhaps the most brilliant and no doubt the most immediately influential of the essayists of the century, was the true heir to their method and point of view. Born five years later than Carlyle and six years earlier than John Stuart Mill, he belonged spiritually to the dominant class of his time, whose materialism in aim and exultation in great possessions seemed to those clearer thinkers fraught with gravest dangers to the future of England. But of the best qualities of that class,—of the energy that made it great in its own sphere and of the optimism that strengthened its faith in its achievements,—he was the chief representative; and though the time has passed when he could be accounted a vital force in the intellectual development of his countrymen, he still gives consummate expression to a view of life which is convincing in its vigor and clarity. The imaginative insight of the artist-critic is lacking in all that he has done,—in the over-loaded splendor of the essay on Milton as in the harsh exaggeration of his judgment of Bacon or his vulgar insistence on the personal peculiarities of Doctor Johnson. Even in such sympathetic studies as the essays on Addison and Madame D'Arblay, his opinions are those of the common man;—though of the common man of enormous knowledge and prodigious power of language. His virtues are the qualities of his defects. His ideas may be those of the reader rather than of the observer; but his books are brilliant with all the richness of the library. He may achieve emphasis rather than truth of style; but he presents his subject with unparalleled definiteness and force. He knows his goal and reaches it. His pictures are unrivaled in vividness. Though the reach of his mind is small, his grasp is absolute and his technique unfaltering.

While the reviewers, early and late, were glorifying the accepted view-point of their age, unauthorized and progressive

opinions of all sorts were seeking expression in the newly-popular essay-dissertation. Most significant for weight of matter and novelty of thought was certainly that amorphous series of weekly essays, published by Coleridge between June 1809 and March 1810 under the title of the *Friend*, and remaining in itself and in its associations one of the curiosities of essay-literature. With the touch of the personal which lends a certain intimate charm to the ill-fated periodical, Coleridge confides to his readers that he had long been in the habit of daily noting down in his "*Memorandum or Common-place Books* both *Incidents* and *Observations*," and that "the Number of these *Notices*, and their *Tendency*, miscellaneous as they were, to one *Common End*" had first encouraged him "to undertake the *Weekly Essay*."<sup>1</sup> But neither a description of method that pointed toward essays of the Baconian type, nor the association with the *Tatler* and *Spectator* implied in Cole-ridge's modest disclaimer of having copied in the *Friend* the "whole scheme and fashion" of these "great founders of the race,"<sup>2</sup> can disguise the fact that his rambling dissertations are essays, if at all, by grace rather than by nature. He had, indeed, none of the gifts of the essayist. As a journalist, he had been not unsuccessful, and the *Watchman*, undertaken a dozen years earlier to disseminate his Unitarian doctrines, shows how persistent was his desire to teach through the essay-dissertation. But the thinker who from childhood had valued facts only as they led to the abstract ideas lying behind them, was almost inevitably without a keen appreciation of the concrete. Nor did any clarifying sense of the audience determine his procedure. He announced that he would exclude from his discussions all personal politics and events of merely passing interest, and would refer his readers directly to "Principles in all things; in Literature, in the Fine Arts, in Morals, in Legislature, in Religion."<sup>3</sup> The principles with which he was concerned were, moreover, of the most abstruse and unfamiliar. A romanticist by temperament and philosophy, he undertook

<sup>1</sup> *The Friend*, ed. 1809-10, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

"to uphold those Truths and those Merits which are founded in the nobler and permanent Parts of our Nature against the Caprices of Fashion, and such Pleasures, as either depend on transitory and accidental causes, or are pursued from less worthy Impulses."<sup>1</sup> The nobler and permanent truths that he teaches, he finds, like his friend Wordsworth, in the elementary human experiences or in the freshly-interpreted doctrines of an accepted religion and government; he takes us to the very heart of his philosophy, when he declares that "whatever humbles the heart and forces the mind inward . . . in proportion as it acquaints us with 'the thing we are,' renders us docile to concurrent testimony of our fellowmen in all ages and in all nations."<sup>2</sup>

Views so alien to the tone of current thought, either radical or conservative, would have been difficult enough of apprehension if embodied in poetry or in informal and suggestive prose. But Coleridge aimed at nothing less than presenting them in all the glory of systematic organization; he wished to have the various principles arranged in "their subordination, their connection, and their application, in all the divisions of our duties and of our pleasures."<sup>3</sup> Weekly essays setting forth such a philosophy in such a manner were foredoomed to failure, and the learned and critical readers on whom their author relied for support soon tired of the "effort of attention"<sup>4</sup> he demanded of them. But the essays of the *Friend*, with all their seriousness and their lumbering search after a system, have the compelling power of fresh and original thought. And though they failed to convey immediately, even to the lesser public to whom Coleridge ultimately appealed, "the new world of intellectual profit"<sup>5</sup> that he had to offer, they form an invaluable record of the ideas coming in to guide, if not to possess, the following century. These ideas, presented far more winningly by Coleridge in the wonderful eloquence of his lectures and monologue-conversations, were, in the next two genera-

<sup>1</sup> *The Friend*, ed. 1809-10, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

tions, appropriated and developed by thinkers as diverse as Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin, Mill and Arnold. For Coleridge, though the philosopher of a school, built on deeply human foundations and brought to light truths that were larger than the creed of any sect. His faults of method or manner, however great, were but the defects of a vital thinker passing into new realms and dealing with a mass of still largely inchoate ideas.

The immediate dissemination of his ideas, in which as an essayist Coleridge signally failed, was carried on by his early admirer and life-long follower, Thomas DeQuincey. For this work DeQuincey was fitted both by his intellectual curiosity and by his singular gift for style. He was, too, in temperament and character enough like the older and infinitely greater man, to become the interpreter of his thought. Both united, though in very different degrees, rare sensitiveness of perception with extraordinary comprehensiveness of mind and deep interest in metaphysics; both were genuine romanticists in their in-born mysticism, their tender emotionalism, and their intense preoccupation with problems of the imagination. But while Coleridge was one of the profoundest thinkers of his day, DeQuincey was but one of its greatest men of letters. For the greater part of his life he was an indefatigable writer for magazines and reviews. Of his critical essays the most characteristic are probably those that, like the *Essay on Style*, deal with literary theory. Though their ideas are, in the main, expansions or adaptations of those already familiarized by Wordsworth or Coleridge or the German critics whose merits DeQuincey so grudgingly allows, and though the development of these ideas is irritatingly indirect and involved, his essays are enriched by a wealth of allusion and invigorated by constant references to real life, on which, in theory, he sets a truly Wordsworthian value. But highly as DeQuincey prized the concrete, his fidelity to fact was, in the last issue, subordinated to fidelity to his own mood. Hence comes the touch of exaggeration everywhere present in his writing, whether in the over-emphasis of an idea, in humor strained beyond geniality,

in satire turned to caricature, or in eloquence that borders on bombast. Yet this very predominance of mood over outer fact, though it has lessened the value of his criticism, has given us the *Autobiographical Sketches* and the *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*, the works on which his fame must ultimately rest. In the curious soul-lore of these studies, considered by their author himself as his one original contribution to literature, living and thoughts about living are inextricably mingled, feeling becomes art and art is feeling. The mystery of suffering, the pathos of childish isolation, the beauty of kindness, the solemnity of death, — such simple themes dominate the circumstances that gave rise to them, and harmonize the various strains of reality in the key of the central emotion. The attempt to analyze and appraise these imaginative impressions puts them at least on the border-line of the character-essay, while their emotional, or aesthetic poignancy lends to them more of the music of poetry than of that "other harmony of prose."

The informal essay of this age is most characteristically represented in the work of Charles Lamb, who made studies of the men and things around him the instrument of a delicate self-revelation, to be compared in its narrower sphere only with that of Montaigne. For the *Essays of Elia*, with all their reserve, are truly autobiographical, so that the reader needs for essential understanding of their writer, neither knowledge of his life nor the fruitful commentary of his letters. Between his self-delination and that of DeQuincey there is an immense distance; where DeQuincey draws all that he sees into his own mood, Lamb looks disinterestedly at the world around him; where the prose-lyrist combines many strains into a symphonic theme of emotion, the no less poetic essayist touches with the light of imagination the homeliest incidents and the deeper moral and spiritual verities. His writings, like his life, are founded on realities, whether of everyday fact or of spiritual vision. Poor, and shadowed by the possibility that he might a second time fall a victim to the insanity that pursued his sister, he neither

shrunk from the burden of family care nor failed in the duties of friendship. Yet with trials beyond those of his fellows, he was, among them all, the one who most truly possessed his own soul. His learning, following a somewhat whimsical line of personal inclination, led him to the drama and poetry of an age remote from the strife of his contemporaries. A friend of many of the greatest men of his time, he was as free from pedantry in his intercourse with them as he was unassuming toward the commonplace visitors who overran his leisure. His interest in persons as in books lay, indeed, in those quaint humors through which individuality unconsciously discloses itself. And it was on his rare power to see and to portray the spiritual physiognomy of people and places that Charles Lamb's power as an essayist was based. His field was limited in the strictest sense to the subjects he knew intimately, to his chosen haunts in town or country, the books he loved to read, and the men and women with whom he passed his days. This first-hand knowledge gives substance and concreteness to all that he wrote. The outlines of Elia's world, however delicate they may be, are always clear; its inner life is never attenuated by divorce from outer fact; it is the world of rashers of bacon and mugs of beer as well as of spiritual insight and moral heroism, of dignified folios as well as of haunting poetry. This double, or rather this central and inclusive, point of view makes Lamb's essays unique in artistic quality. Their words have a Shakespearean homeliness as well as a Shakespearean reach. By a sort of spiritual felicity, ordinary actions and events are brought into the region of those deeper experiences where smiles lie close to tragedy.

When the *Essays of Elia* appeared in 1822, the informal personal essay of the nineteenth century had long taken definite shape. Leigh Hunt, nine years younger than Charles Lamb, had in 1807, after some unimportant journalistic successes, begun his career as an essayist by contributing to the *Traveller* and the *Globe* discussions of the acting and actors of the day, modeled after the *Spectator*. This consideration of the

actor's art was an innovation — and a creative innovation — in criticism; it both opened up a new field for the familiar essay and furthered a more discriminating treatment of the theater. The courage, independence, and power to communicate ideas that inspired these early essays led Leigh Hunt, a year later, to join his brother in setting up the *Examiner*, a paper that aimed "to assist in producing Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever."<sup>1</sup>

Famous as was the struggle of the *Examiner* to bring about reform in Parliament and a greater liberality in political opinion, the paper is of interest to the student of the essay chiefly because of its attempt to treat all subjects with literary taste. Among its means to this end were the familiar essays which Leigh Hunt contributed to it and in which he may be said to have discovered his true vein. For in spite of his brilliant and courageous incursion into politics, he was, above all, the man of letters, finding inspiration in books and in an exquisitely imaginative world rather than in real life. Between himself and the harsher realities of actual existence he drew a veil of optimism, — and then forgot what he did not see. When sentenced to the Surrey jail for libel in the *Examiner*, he had the walls of his room covered with rose-trellised paper, its ceiling tinted with sky-blue, and its windows filled with birds and flowers; and in that idyllic retreat, with indomitable cheerfulness, he went on talking and working for the two years of his imprisonment.

To such a temperament, however bound to the practical world by necessity or duty, the lure of past or present lay primarily in its sentiment. Leigh Hunt is often said to belong to the eighteenth rather than to the nineteenth century. But in truth he lived outside the world of time and place, seeing past and present alike in the alluring light of the pastoral. His portrayal of people and places is heightened by the emotion

<sup>1</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography*, ed. 1860, vol. I, p. 203.

through which he sees them; their peculiar quality lies in what might be called their type-sentiment. This quality appears nowhere more vividly than in *Walks Home at Night*, a wonderful composite picture of the night-life of the city and the natural world encompassing it. It touches with its aesthetic charm essays reminiscent in name and subject of the eighteenth century, like *The Old Gentleman* and *The Maid Servant*, and appears characteristically in *An Earth upon Heaven*, where the good things we know and love continue to be our delight in a world whose reality has been purged of any touch of pain.

More representative of his age than any of its essayists, except the creator of Elia, was William Hazlitt, a man more concerned with facts and more freely speculative in temper than Coleridge or DeQuincey, more interested in political and social questions than Lamb, and of far greater energy and grasp of mind than Leigh Hunt. His first important essays were contributed to the *Examiner*, with the general policy of which he was cordially in sympathy. But though he worked with Hunt in the cause of radical liberalism, he was, in political interest as in private life, singularly isolated from any group of his contemporaries. From Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, with whom he had felt the spiritual glow and ardor of Revolutionary days, he was inevitably separated by what in his enduring radicalism he scorned as the recantation of those earlier leaders of revolt. His separation from his own party was hardly less complete; for, by some strange freak of hero-worship, he accepted Napoleon as the protagonist of democracy, and so was himself by many members considered one of the betrayers. A born dissenter, Hazlitt was much more than a dissenter. His protestantism, however mixed with egoism, was in part at least a passionate reaction against the narrowness of any system, and he had his full share of the true essayist's delight in the world as "a fine subject for speculation." Nothing human, nothing that touches humanity, was foreign to his sympathy, and his rebellion against the shackles of cause or creed left him free to expatriate at large over the field of his observation. Yet

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however wide the range of his speculations, they are peculiarly his own; it is of the essence of Hazlitt to see with his own eyes and to speak with his own tongue. Though before he became a professional writer he had devoted himself to the study of metaphysics and political economy and had been more than fairly successful as a painter, there is no man of his generation who is less the creature of the studio or the library, who speaks more directly from himself and his own experience. Out-of-door life and art, poetry and political economy, great men of the past and great men of the present, filled him with genuine enthusiasm, but never awed him into the tentative expression of his opinion. From "the dignified and splendid savagery"<sup>1</sup> of the Letter to Gifford to "the mellowed animosity"<sup>2</sup> of the *Spirit of the Age*; from the joy of life that filled him as he walked, to the delight that thrilled him before the beauty of a picture, — everything that he wrote had the vigor and convincingness of a first-hand impression. And the passionate intensity of his nature made him as eloquent as he was direct. Beside the vivid truth of his words, DeQuincey's long-drawn harmonies are empty, Macaulay's magnificence vulgar, Hunt's sprightly humor monotonous. Only Lamb can triumphantly stand the test of comparison with the nervous, sinewy power of his thought and language.<sup>3</sup>

These essayists were all dominated by the intellectual character of the first third of their century, though the lives of some of them extended considerably beyond it. The work of the three greatest among them — Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Lamb — was over in 1834; of the reviewers, William Gifford, the oldest, died in 1826, and John Wilson, the youngest, in 1854; Hunt, DeQuincey, and Macaulay lived until 1859. Of their relations to the life of their time it may be said that the reviewers and Macaulay represented the prevailing opinions of the day; that

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Henley, Introduction to Hazlitt's *Collected Works*, ed. 1902-4, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine Birrell, *William Hazlitt*, ed. 1902, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> W. E. Henley, *supra*, p. xxv.

Coleridge, followed at a distance by DeQuincey, charted out the new romantic criticism; that Hazlitt and Hunt upheld the discredited doctrines of democracy; and that Lamb sought inspiration in the more permanent humanities. But in spite of these differences they were all in great degree affected by the reaction in the early years of the century against the excesses of revolutionary thought, and by the divorce between the world of ideas and the world of practice which accompanied that reaction.

The results of this separation appear conspicuously in the poets and essayists of the day. Wordsworth and Coleridge, who had been among the first to herald the new democracy, were content with partial solutions of the problems of their age and failed to fulfill their early promise; Byron and Shelley, the inheritors of their ardor for liberty, suffered the condemnation of a public true at least to its own prejudices, and died in alienation and exile from their native land. The philosophical Coleridge dealt only in abstractions; the practical-minded reviewers had no philosophy; the enthusiastic Hunt was poor in substance; the sturdy Macaulay was without vision; the free-thinking Hazlitt found his hero in Napoleon; even Lamb, with all his veracity and charm, cared little for ideas as such.

The larger public, no less than its literary spokesmen, was for a time narrowed and warped in intelligence by its sense of the hopeless division between theory and practical matters. But in the early thirties certain marked changes both in the subjects and in the method of its thinking became evident, all of them ultimately fruitful for the essay. Curiosity about foreign thought came to be more general and more intelligent; Goethe, to Coleridge the great pagan and to DeQuincey the tawdriest of intellectual guides, began to rival in influence the Kantian philosophers and Jean Paul Richter. The religious consciousness was quickened to a vivid realization of things unseen, as well as to a more general concern for the foundations of its faith. Above all, a deep interest was awakening in the social and moral conditions that were crying aloud

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for a remedy. The "new conscience" of that day, social rather than religious, in spite of such notable exceptions as Keble and Newman, occupied itself primarily with the evils that seemed to threaten the nation's life: with the moral dangers inherent in England's material prosperity, the skepticism undermining religious faith, the failure of the state to insure order or justice, the lack of individuality or initiative in the developing industrial order. In dealing with these questions thought became more definite and practical, and practical matters were in turn treated with something of a philosophical largeness of view. This prevailing absorption in social problems determined, for a time at least, the further development of the essay. Some of the writers of yesterday were still in their prime; but the ideas that were to mould the morrow belonged to younger men, to whom all things again seemed possible, because to their fresh vision, unconsciously Wordsworthian, the England of their day offered the plastic material from which might be shaped into reality the highest hopes for humanity that the past had known.

Thomas Carlyle, the earliest and most widely influential leader in this movement, was the great student and critic of his generation. Far-ranging in interest, unwearyed in industry, gifted with rare insight and power of speech, he was able to carry on the work of intellectual enlightenment begun by Coleridge a generation earlier with a vividness and energy that were wholly his own. Nor is it easy to exaggerate the magnitude of this task. It was to Carlyle that the England of the last century mainly owed its knowledge of Germany; that northern myth and legend began to gain a hold on the popular imagination; that heroes of many ages and nations became familiar friends of the general reader. Yet this interpretation of the past was but the beginning of Carlyle's work. His deepest passion was to reveal to his countrymen, luke-warm in conviction and egoistic in aim as he held them to be, the spiritual possibilities of the present. Of a fiery sincerity of soul, he cast away the conventions of vocabulary as of creed, and appealed, in what might be called a spirit of natu-

ral puritanism, to the more heroic elements of character. He was a man who, as Meredith says, "stood constantly in the presence of those 'Eternal verities' of which he speaks";<sup>1</sup> and it was with a lively sense of the mystical forces that work for righteousness that he called on the men of his age to forget the Byronic sentimentality and crass materialism in which they alternately reveled, to cast away the faded vestments, the outworn garments, of their lost beliefs, to put on the armor of a more earnest purpose, and to press on to the prize of a social life that would express a present reality.

With a penetration, a moral fervor, and a sense of the concrete unequaled in his time, Carlyle had neither the patience nor the sanity of the thinker. The world in which his imagination lived, a world where by some strange sleight-of-hand might was always right and life was lived on an heroic scale, was as Utopian as the vision of any dreamer, or at most was occasionally related to reality by marvelous flashes of insight. But if Carlyle had not the power of seeing his world steadily and whole, he penetrated to the very heart of his material and presented it in a picture of convincing verisimilitude. His mind was, too, with all its intensity, an instrument of many strings; he could be as bitter a satirist as Swift, a preacher as impassioned as Wyclif, a poet as exquisite in sensitiveness as Shelley. It is the union of qualities so often mutually destructive and almost always discordant that gives his essays the delicacy of perception and the prophetic fervor, the tenderness of sympathy and the power of scorn, the sense of spiritual reality and the relentless painting of the actual as he saw it, which make up their peculiar character. They are all, too, informed with the spiritualized morality which is in Carlyle's eyes the very essence of living, and so, whatever their nominal subject, they give expression to the gospel which he believed could regenerate England. He delights to teach by example, but he cannot refrain from pointing the moral of his tale. He makes of the character-essay a portrait no less individual than that of a

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, ed. 1912, vol. II, p. 332.

hero of novel or drama; in the historic portrait he presents the type that illustrates and illumines his gospel; both together form a gallery of character-pictures in which the most diverse individuals — Mahomet or Robert Burns, Teufelsdröch or Abbot Samson — are seen, if not wholly in their habit as they lived, yet with all the self-evident reality of actual existence.

The social passion that made Carlyle the animating spiritual force of his generation, found as clear expression in the work of John Stuart Mill. In method the two men were widely different, Mill being as inevitably the logician and teacher among the essayists of his day as was Carlyle the preacher-poet. Belonging by intellectual descent to the philosophers and economists of the eighteenth century, he accepted unreservedly their faith in freedom, in the power of reason, and in the right of every individual to live his own life. But the tradition that he inherited, he infinitely widened and enriched. Beginning his career as a writer by coöperating with his father and Jeremy Bentham in their work as radical reformers, and accepting the utilitarian creed in which he had been brought up less as a philosophy than as a religion, he was yet able to incorporate into his own life and theory the best thought of his contemporaries, of whatever school. He was himself in character and temper the perfect exponent of that flexible and truth-loving spirit in which he trusted for the improvement of mankind. In an age when imagination and faith, the elementary duties and the primitive emotions, were the popular watchwords of progress, he reasserted the place of the intellectual in the moral advance of mankind.

Yet the permanent value of his essays rests far less on their historic significance than on their revelation of an extraordinary personality. As clearly as even the incomparable *Autobiography*, they set before our eyes Mill's disinterestedness, his emotional and æsthetic sensitiveness to ideas, his patient zeal for truth. Lacking in the intimacy of Montaigne, the courteous ease of Addison and Goldsmith, the fervor of Carlyle, the delicacy of Charles Lamb, they are yet marked by a truly

philosophic breadth of view and integrity of judgment. Mill's appeal is to the intellect of men, not to their prejudices or emotions, and his undoubted power as a teacher lies in the cultivation of that rightmindedness and devotion to truth which is the distinctive quality of his own thought. Without the virtues or vices of passion, he reached a relatively small audience; but those whom he touched he inspired to a fundamental and progressive intellectual activity.

Mill's style is, from inner necessity, at the furthest possible remove from that of Carlyle: where one is forceful and abrupt, picturesque and thrilling, the other is lucid, firm and flexible; while one is essentially poetic, the other is typically prosaic, in that it lends itself with absolute fidelity to the expression of every shading and modulation of thought. Carlyle's best legacy is the picture or phrase that touches the heart to resolution, Mill's the formulation of principles that lie at the root of social justice, or the presentation of truths that are the foundation of individual morality. But the differences between the two men, whether in style or character, did not conceal from them their essential sympathy: Carlyle early recognized Mill as a brother mystic; Mill was throughout his life convinced that Carlyle reached the ends he himself sought, by swifter ways than those of logic.<sup>1</sup> And, in fact, the affiliations connecting them were more significant than the differences in their complementary approach to the problems of their age. Carlyle's trumpet-call to righteousness was like the words in which he spoke, personal, enigmatic, spiritually illuminating even when intellectually baffling; Mill's gospel belonged in thought and language to the newer dispensation of reason. But though the one saw behind the facts the ever-mysterious Immensities and Veracities, the other the laws of justice and humanity that we are slowly spelling out, the two were at one, not only in truth to their differing visions of reality, but in their large perception of the ends toward which progress moves.

In the vast extension of essay-writing in the second half of

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. 1887, pp. 175-6.

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the nineteenth century, the essay of literary criticism easily held its own. Indeed so general was its use that its history during those years would almost resolve itself into that of the literary scholarship and appreciation of the age. Through it Swinburne hurled his thunderbolts of eulogy or of scorn, and Andrew Lang made it echo of far-off days; in it Stevenson paid his tribute to romance, Meredith discussed the function of the comic spirit, John Richard Green and Leslie Stephen interpreted the historic and philosophic relationships of literature, Austin Dobson painted vignettes of the courtly centuries, and John Morley shed over the same periods the light of the moral humanities. But among the poets and scholars, the thinkers and statesmen who during these years used the essay for their various purposes, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater stand, if not supreme, préminent for their wide range of subject-matter and their grasp of critical problems. Alike in disinterestedness of aim, breadth of scholarship and delicacy of discrimination, they were yet strikingly different in their literary affiliations and in their temperaments. Both writers included in the critic's work the dissemination of fresh material for thought, the cultivation in his readers of intellectual flexibility and artistic sensitiveness. But Arnold, the true son of Thomas Arnold of Rugby, stressed the social element in this conception: he dwelt on the need of propagating knowledge as well as of knowing; would reform society by a culture that makes impossible its rigid limitations of mind and spirit. Pater, with the instinct of the romantic psychologist, turned rather to the study of the individual and that of the race, tracing the æsthetic perception through its curious transformations, or emphasizing its value as an element in experience. Arnold's conviction that the ultimate function of criticism is to further public intelligence and morality inevitably associated him with the forces working, especially through education, for better daily living; Pater's intuitive understanding of the more elusive phases of spiritual development attracted him irresistibly to those transitional periods in personal and national life in which new ideas and

aspirations were beginning to define themselves, and made him their unequaled interpreter. Arnold, by descent a Liberal, turned from the religious half-way house of his generation as resolutely as did Cardinal Newman, and, notwithstanding his faith in the "power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness," stood firmly with the rationalists; Pater, skeptical in temperament, yet with a strong bent toward mysticism, and a distinctly religious up-bringing, found the embodiment of his æsthetic-religious aspirations in the rites and ceremonies of the English Church. An inflexible honesty of thought ruled Arnold's delicate perceptions, a rare sensitiveness constantly enriched and refined Pater's. But Arnold appreciated the subtle play of religious feeling in the hymns of St. Francis and the asceticism of Eugénie de Guérin, as Pater recognized the intellectual element, the "scholarship," in Raphael or Prosper Mérimée. Fortunate in their escape from the narrowing prejudices of the early years of the century, the two together gave expression in typically individual forms to the best critical spirit of their age. Arnold, though a poet, was primarily the thinker and judge; Pater, born a critic, was nevertheless the artist in his desire to body forth his idea. The most characteristic work of the one was his analysis of the function of art and criticism in modern society, of the other a series of imaginary portraits that throw light on the æsthetic and spiritual development of the race.

While the literary essay has in recent years held a high place, it has been relatively much less important than in the days of Dryden or Jeffrey, or even in those of Carlyle. With the more diversified interests of a wider reading-public, new subjects have been dealt with in the essay, and old ones have been treated with infinitely greater variety. Modern scientific discoveries and the bearing of science on practical matters have together resulted in a vast output of essays, of which Huxley's are perhaps the most brilliant examples, that bring some portion of the knowledge of the investigator to the readers of newspapers and magazines. The interest in social questions, become

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a moving force in the generation of Carlyle and Mill and infinitely deepened by Ruskin's appeal to the public conscience, has increased with every decade, until there is to-day a whole literature of essays dealing with social conditions, their evils and their remedies. The love of nature, stimulated by the poetry of the early nineteenth century and already appearing in the essays of its early years, has created for us such later records of days in wood and field as those of Burroughs and Jefferies. Character-study and the more intimate personal experiences have, since the time of Stevenson, given subject-matter for such informal essays as those of Alice Meynell and John Galsworthy.

But any attempt to classify the essays of our time is futile, since the range of their subjects is hardly less wide than the interests of the age. For the essay has practically ceased to be the peculiar tool of the writing class, and is passing into the hands of every intelligent worker who wishes to transmit knowledge of any kind to his fellows. The essay-readers of a century ago are, in fact, the essay-writers of to-day, and in their use of this most flexible of literary forms for virtually every purpose the essay is at length becoming a truly popular medium of communication.

The intimate connection of the essay with the daily life of our time is best understood when viewed as the outcome of its earlier history. Critical and tentative in nature, it came into being only when the skeptical, experimental spirit first plainly declared itself. Montaigne and Bacon, with their less illustrious co-workers in the closing years of the Renaissance, were in a very real sense "the first of the moderns," inasmuch as they formulated the rational philosophy of life which underlies all our later progress. After their work of creation came a pause of almost two generations before Dryden and his compeers, by using the essay for the discussion of literary questions, widened the range of its subject-matter and showed more clearly the compass of its intellectual and artistic possibilities. On this new development followed in the early eighteenth century the

second stage of its popularization, the elementary treatment of all sorts of subjects in the periodical essay. The excellence of style and the wide popular appeal of this form of the essay established it almost immediately in general use; and for three quarters of a century, while the world was changing around it, it preserved the traditions of England's great age of prose and reason. In the years following the French Revolution the essay entered on a new period of its history, but a period which had, in fact, been long preparing. The great reviews and the unparalleled growth of journalism gave writers their first opportunity for bringing home their ideas to a large circle of general readers, who, however diverse in tastes and interests, were alike in a habit of reading and in a facile intellectual curiosity.

The essay, responding throughout its whole history to the demands of its readers, has marked the growth of the democratic spirit in literature hardly less clearly than the popular advance to a scientific, or rational, point of view. A passion for understanding himself and his experiences led Montaigne to a deep sense of fellowship with his kind. Bacon desired knowledge no more ardently than he sought to apply it to the ends of human happiness. A public eager for instruction, and united in national and social enthusiasm, was the condition of the popular development of the essay in the eighteenth century; widespread interest in social, literary and scientific questions accounts in great part for its phenomenal expansion in the last one hundred years. Nor has the society to whose needs the essay has shaped itself been the mere passive recipient of ideas; it has appropriated the art through which it has learned, and made this art one of its most useful instruments.

Recognition of the constantly extending practical uses of the essay must not lose sight of the fact that, however serviceable, it is yet an art-form, and as such its wider adoption must tend to increase the capacity both of writers and of readers to appreciate and to create literary art. John Stuart Mill traced the influence of Wordsworth over his own logical mind to a

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certain prosaic quality in the poet that enabled the reasoner to find common ground with him. In some such manner the essay, the typically prosaic art-form, gives natural expression to an age preëminently practical and rational. But even as it fulfills the needs of the practically minded, it strengthens the art-impulses of those who use it, and so does much to stimulate the development of the more purely imaginative sensibilities and powers.

**THE ENGLAND  
OF GEORGE CRABBE**



## THE ENGLAND OF GEORGE CRABBE

GEORGE CRABBE stands peculiarly alone in his generation. While his fellow poets, older and younger, were stirred to speculation and sentiment, he kept his eye fixed on the people and things around him; while they sang of nature and the soul of man, he painted pictures of the England in which he was living. The ideas that inspired his contemporaries were in considerable measure divorced from the conditions of actual life: the characters they created were largely the creatures of mood or theory; the world they fashioned, however informed by ideas and suffused by emotion, was relatively unsubstantial, limited in the elements of human experience. Alike over the half-way house where Wordsworth, the sturdiest realist of them all, reconciled the spiritual life of the philosopher-poet with the laborious days of the peasant-shepherd; over the "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence" through which Shelley would conquer suffering and wrong; over the demand of the superman for self-realization into which Byron translated the democratic ideal of his day, hangs the glamour of romance, the illusive light of a world in which neither circumstance nor character is weighted with everyday reality.

But Crabbe's world is of the very stuff of our daily existence; he knows no people who have not truly lived, recognizes no philosophy that has not long been a part of men's daily thought. Hazlitt, himself of the generation which felt to the full the charms of the poetry of romance, said in *The Spirit of the Age* that Crabbe's wide popularity could "be accounted for on no other principle than the strong ties that bind us to the world about us, and our involuntary yearnings after whatever in any manner powerfully and directly reminds us of it."<sup>1</sup> Crabbe's

<sup>1</sup> "Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe," *The Spirit of the Age, Collected Works*, ed. 1902-4, vol. iv, p. 348.

portrayal of the people among whom he dwelt, and the scenes with which he was familiar, gives us the very lineaments of the England of his day. His poetry is rich in incident and full of men and things; in its emphasis on character and action it is akin to the novel rather than to the song. In it the poor, the outcast, the workers of that middle class which was to rule the destinies of the next century, appeared for the first time in their fashion as they lived, and by the very realism of their garb and accent added to the theoretic recognition of men's rights and the mystical perception of human unity which inspired the poetry of the Revolution, an understanding of actual life so inclusive that none of its experiences could remain outside the pale of knowledge and of sympathy.

Yet Crabbe's poetry, though it stood alone in its age, was intimately related to the main lines of advance in the eighteenth century. The predominating interest of that time was social. The literature of the day was permeated by a double enthusiasm, — for man as a social being and for society as making possible man's rational development. Pope was not, it is true, the first to consider man the proper study of mankind; but his famous line aptly epitomized the spirit of his contemporaries, who considered the mysteries of the universe chiefly in their bearings on human life, and found in the rational ordering of society a primary motive to action. The aspects of experience which the writers of the Enlightenment emphasized were, accordingly, neither the reach of individual capacity nor the ecstasy of mystic vision, but the inter-relationships and mutual responsibilities of beings living together in society. Pope himself sought the explanation of evil, not in the wickedness of the sufferer nor in the righteous will of Omnipotence, but in the good of that larger whole to which all individual interests must be subordinated and with which all individual happiness is ultimately identical. Shaftesbury brought religion to the test of human experience by applying to the idea of God the highest standards of human morality: those ideas of justice and goodness and truth on conformity with which the virtue even of the

Divine Being must depend. Addison and Steele, avowing their purpose to bring knowledge to the ignorant and to make kindness and urbanity the universal rule of life, are perhaps the best exponents of the characteristic ethical feeling of the age. Swift, pessimist and cynic though he was, struck a note of deep humanity in his denunciations alike of the condition of Ireland and of the vanity and brutality of mankind.

Closely associated with this concentration of attention upon man in his social relations was a wide-spread interest in every-day experience which gave motive and material to poets and thinkers as well as to the first great novelists. Even Wordsworth allowed Pope the gift of first-hand observation. The foibles noted in the *Spectator* are photographic in their accuracy. Defoe responded to a demand of the reading-public when he transformed the romance of roguery into the novel of character by his minute portrayal of circumstance and personality. A new and peculiarly modern realism appeared very early in the work of the nature-poets. In *The Seasons* the natural beauty of the country is enhanced by pictures of real hay-makers and sheep-shearers; the severity of the winter storm drives the slender-footed robin to seek a refuge by the farmer's hospitable fireside. Shenstone's Schoolmistress is as vividly described as is her "plodding pattern," the mother-hen; and the defiant victim of the birchen rod and his terror-stricken little sister are real children though they live in an idyllic world.

In spite of these exquisite touches of reality, human life as presented in the poetry of the early eighteenth century is still so remote from daily experience that it quickly recedes into the distance of decorative art. As travel became more general, however, and knowledge of the country more intimate, a deepening sympathy appeared in the poetic treatment of its people. Gray, musing in the country churchyard, felt his human kinship with the lowly, in face of the great equality of death; Goldsmith, in his lament over the miseries of the Deserted Village, indulged in a genuine as well as a luxuriously senti-

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mental tear; and finally, Burns and Blake, one three and one five years younger than Crabbe, found their chief inspiration in the lives of the poor among whom they had grown up and whom they both intimately knew. But the aspects of the life of poverty revealed in their verse were widely different from those pictured by Crabbe. Burns, primarily a singer, discovered the lyric beauty of peasant-poetry and transformed the conventional pastoral into the idyll of real life; Blake, perhaps the most mystical of English poets, saw everyday experience as symbol rather than as fact.

But Crabbe, infinitely less poetic than either of these contemporaries of his, scrutinized the life that inspired them to song with the keenness at once of the novelist and the scientist. What education he had was that of a surgeon, and from his youth up he was an indefatigable student of botany and entomology. He thus brought to the study of people the habits of the naturalist. Critics are fond of saying that he learned to know them as he knew the fauna and flora of his country; that he classified them as he classified his beetles. To a rare natural power of observation, developed both by opportunity and by training, he owed his peculiar quality as a poet. As his experience broadened he greatly enlarged the field of his art; the villagers were followed by the citizens of the Borough, his poor parishioners by the well-to-do Englishmen of the *Tales*. But he never swerved either from his early habit of observation or from his early purpose to picture the world as he saw it,

“As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not.”<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt complained that he wrote about the country and country life “only to take the charm out of it, and to dispel the illusion, the glory, and the dream, which have hovered over it in golden verse from Theocritus to Cowper.”<sup>2</sup> But Crabbe, feeling the deep significance of the most commonplace character,

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, I, 54.

<sup>2</sup> “Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe,” *The Spirit of the Age*, Collected Works, ed. 1902-4, IV, p. 351.

found the romance or tragedy of the fairest illusion pale beside it; the glory and the dream that for a Rousseau or a Maeterlinck hover over a society where vice and the wrongs done by man to man will have vanished, he saw in the daily life of men who struggled, and often vainly, against heavy odds of circumstance. It is no accident that he is oftenest compared with Shakespeare or Balzac or Meredith, writers who found the ideal, if at all, in and through the actual. His horizon may be narrower than theirs, but the people he creates, or interprets, live with those of the greater masters in right of their genuine and substantial humanity.

The leisure of mind that enabled Crabbe to become the great character-student among his contemporaries was bought at the price of an almost entire aloofness from the main intellectual currents of the time. He had apparently no interest in the speculative activity that was moving radical and conservative alike to seek out a social philosophy more adequate to new conditions; "was as indifferent as a good old-fashioned clergyman could very well be to the existence of any new order of ideas in the world."<sup>1</sup> His first important poems were published eight years before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and his last, four years after the fall of Napoleon; he was welcomed to the friendship of Burke and Johnson and might easily have read Tennyson's *Early Poems* and Ebenezer Elliott's *Corn-Law Rhymes*. Yet it would seem that he was little moved by the events that changed the face of Europe while he pursued the even course of his life as a clergyman. He rejoiced with all lovers of freedom at the fall of the Bastille, and gloried in England's final victory over Napoleon; but a certain sober good sense and fair-mindedness kept him, in the midst of the passionate excesses of the years following the Revolution, free from the contagion of prejudice and party. From the beginning, though bound to him by ties of deepest gratitude, he saw the weakness of Burke's ultra-conservatism, and, true throughout his life to

<sup>1</sup> Sir Leslie Stephen, "Crabbe's Poetry," *Hours in a Library, Second Series*, ed. 1881, pp. 286-7.

his principle that sometimes one party was right and sometimes the other, he gave his vote to Whig or Tory according to his judgment of the particular question.<sup>1</sup>

After the publication of *The Newspaper* in 1785, Crabbe was silent for twenty-two years; but, though his personal experience had widened greatly in that long interval, *The Parish Register* and the poems that followed it showed no change in his position as a thinker. As a poet he was deeply moved only by the concrete, even such semi-speculative subjects as religion and patriotism lying outside his range. In his preface to the poems of 1807 he tells us that, after weighing the claims of religious and national poetry, and after many vain efforts to write on these high themes, he had given up the attempt from a conviction of his own unfitness for the task.<sup>2</sup>

But though Crabbe was singularly indifferent to the theories, political or philosophic or social, that interested his contemporaries of all schools, and though his isolation from the main currents of thought in his time gave more than a touch of provinciality to almost everything he wrote, we can hardly regret an indifference that left him leisure to be himself. Meredith says in *The Amazing Marriage* that "men and women grow to their dimensions" only when human events, things concerning you and me, instead of the "deafening catastrophes now afflicting and taking all conversation out of us," form the staple of thought and talk.<sup>3</sup> Certainly Crabbe's freedom from a too absorbing interest in the ideas that were already shaping the future made it possible for him to study the distinctly human aspects of his own age and to picture those qualities of character and circumstance that were at once the outcome of past conditions and the material with which the future was to deal.

Although by temperament and training Crabbe was little affected by theories, he was brought from his earliest infancy into close contact with the elementary realities of existence.

<sup>1</sup> R. Huchon, *George Crabbe and His Times*, tr. Frederick Clarke, ed. 1907, p. 454.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. 1905, vol. I, pp. 96-7.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. 1909, pp. 30-1.

It is, indeed, impossible to overestimate the influence of the surroundings of his childhood in defining the quality of his poetry, of which his experience, early and late, forms warp and woof. He was born in Aldborough, a forlorn seaport and fishing village on the coast of Suffolk, and from the hardships of his own youth learned to know to the full the misery that has ever been the birthright of hopeless poverty. Aldborough is the original of *The Village*, and the reader of the poems has little need of biographer or antiquarian to picture the straggling hamlet, hemmed in on one side by the sea and on the other by scowling fields. The house in which he lived as a boy, destroyed by the waves before he reached manhood, was, according to all testimony, a low cottage with one or two rooms on the ground-floor and bedrooms under the thatched roof above. If the poet himself did not in his early years want for food and warmth, he at least saw in the homes of his neighbors "the misery of a stinted meal," the cheerless discomfort of the unlighted hearth, the griefs of stricken families, who, robbed of their all by the sea, begged "a poor protection from the poor."<sup>1</sup> For the inhabitants of Aldborough — or the Village — were never free from the terror of the ocean, advancing steadily on their ever-lessening shore, —

"Till some fierce tide, with more imperious sway,  
Sweeps the low hut and all it holds away."<sup>2</sup>

Scarcely less terrible, and even more forbidding, than the encroaching sea was the barren, marshy country that lay above and behind the fishing hamlet. What beauty it had was the beauty of desolation. If we may judge from Crabbe's persistent descriptions of it, its somber harshness impressed him even more deeply than the sullen terror of the ocean. Its spirit and features appear and reappear in his poems; he is thought to refer to it when in later years he writes: —

"My own sad world, where I had never seen  
The earth productive, or the sky serene."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, 1, 169, 179, 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 127-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Posthumous Tales*, xxii, 195-6.

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From it he drew the picture so familiar to readers of *The Village* : —

“Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,  
Lends the light turf that warms the neighboring poor;  
From thence a length of burning sand appears,  
Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;  
Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,  
Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye:  
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,  
And to the ragged infant threaten war;  
There poppies, nodding, mock the hope of toil;  
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;  
Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,  
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;  
O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,  
And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade;  
With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,  
And a sad splendour vainly shines around.”<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe's interest, however, centered less in the menacing nature that threatened the very existence of Aldborough than in the lives of its inhabitants. Though fishermen by trade, the men spent much of their time in smuggling and wrecking, and were thus doubly degraded by poverty and a criminal calling. With this “bold, artful, surly, savage race,”<sup>2</sup> whose vices and misfortunes first moved him to paint the country as it was, the future poet of the poor could never have had any real sympathy. Yet he was forced from earliest childhood into the most intimate relations with his neighbors by his father's many-sided connection with the activities of the town. The elder Crabbe, after several years of teaching, had settled in Aldborough when he was about twenty years old as collector of customs, and from that time had been one of the leading men of the place. He was, as his office required, unwearied in the pursuit of smugglers, and, according to the records of the church, was for many years an active member of the vestry. Moreover, his salary as collector of customs being only ten pounds a year, he eked out his living by fishing. But though energetic and honest, and more than ordinarily able and intelligent, he seems to have been a man of

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, I, 68-78.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

passionate nature, and after the death of an infant son in 1762, he became so intemperate that the life of his family was made increasingly wretched by his violence. Growing up in such untoward conditions, an observant boy like George Crabbe soon learned to know intimately the life of the "wild amphibious race"<sup>1</sup> with whom his fortunes were cast. His description of inexorable nature which oppressed the villagers in their daily struggles for an insufficient dole of daily bread is only a trifle less vivid than his picture of their lives; their sordid existence is revealed in the coarse pleasures of their hours of leisure, as well as in the mean adventures of smugglers, or of wreckers pursuing the misery that the ocean had spared.

George Crabbe the elder apparently soon recognized the intellectual gifts of his son, and, in spite of his poverty, did his utmost to prepare the boy for a calling better suited to his abilities than that of a fisherman. Twice he sent him to boarding-school, the dame's school of the day offering little more than care for the children and an elementary knowledge of reading; and twice his hopes for his son's progress and happiness were disappointed. To the first school the boy went when so young that he could not fasten his own collar, and there he almost lost his life through a brutal and careless punishment. In the second, though he was hardly happier, he made some progress in his studies and laid up a great store of impressions of the boys and men who bullied and cringed, feasted and quarreled around him. These two schools having proved unsatisfactory, his father next determined to train his son, now fourteen years old, for a surgeon, and to this end bound him as apprentice for seven years to an apothecary at Wickham Brook. But here conditions were even worse than they had been before: the young Crabbe found himself little better than a farm-hand, with no chance to learn and forced into contact with rude and ignorant fellow workers. At last he took matters into his own hands, returned for a short time to his home, and then, against the will of his father, established

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, I, 85.

himself with an apothecary in Woodbridge, where, though he learned little of surgery, he filled prescriptions, lived with congenial people, and developed in every way, until he was ready to go back as a surgeon to Aldborough at the age of twenty-one.

Though his first year of practice was apparently successful and though he went at its close to study medicine and surgery in London, Crabbe's career as a physician was filled to the full with humiliation. He was probably in part the victim of local jealousies and professional rivalry; but in the most favorable circumstances he could scarcely have hoped to succeed as a physician. He had neither a thorough knowledge of medicine, nor the confidence in himself that might have made him happily bold without it; and, though his dogged perseverance kept him from yielding to difficulties apparently overwhelming, he was by nature singularly at a disadvantage in occupations demanding initiative or adaptability. In the five years of his practice in Aldborough he found, indeed, every reason for despair and none for hope. Yet this long period of ineffective endeavor was not without significance. During the intervals of his school-life he had helped his father in his many kinds of work, and had even in the later years of his medical practice earned a large part of his scanty living by the rough labor of the boats and wharves. He had found time, also, to continue the study of botany and entomology begun at Woodbridge, and while in charge of the parish poor, he had learned to know even more intimately the sordid misery of his neighbors. These later years in his native district completed his peculiar preparation for poetry. He wrote little, it is true, at the time, concentrating his attention on the practical work of his various callings, and on his several lines of study. But his more intelligent knowledge of country and people deepened his understanding of them, and his enforced familiarity with much that he would gladly have escaped served to stereotype in his memory scenes that else might have passed from him with the passing of his somber boyhood.

But these early impressions, deeply etched upon his mind,

might never have taken form in poetry, without the stimulus of imaginative literature, contact with which, happily, was not wanting. His father, who was something of a poet and a sincere lover of books, often spent his evenings in reading his favorite poems — especially those of Milton, Young, and Pope — aloud to his family. To the boy, who, in his wind-swept, wave-washed home, listened to the roll of great English verse, books opened the door of escape to the larger life in which his mind might find itself. His writing bears irrefutable testimony to the influence of the poets with whom his father made him early familiar. Besides forming his taste, they must have done much to strengthen in him that sense of the moral order of the universe which underlay all his study of actual people and conditions. Milton's justification of the ways of God to man, Pope's triumphant assertion that whatever is, is right, would seem at first glance as likely as the gilded pictures of pastoral life to arouse the protest of the boy who had from earliest childhood felt the relentless enmity of nature to humankind, and had seen scowling suspicion and "sullen woe"<sup>1</sup> everywhere in the faces around him. But there was nothing of the rebel in Crabbe;<sup>2</sup> and in spite of his familiarity with facts which seemed to discredit their conclusions, he unhesitatingly accepted from the great poet of Puritanism, as from the great poet of the Enlightenment, the conception of an ultimately rational and beneficent universe.

Even more absorbing, and perhaps no less influential in shaping his poetic character, were "the ancient worthies of romance" with whom in his early years he sought brief respite from a life of premature sadness. While his father amused himself with the mathematical studies which were his especial interest, the boy read everything on which he could lay his hands. Especially happy were his wanderings through the "world bewitched" of fairyland and legend,

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, I, 86.

<sup>2</sup> R. Huchon, *George Crabbe and His Times*, tr. Frederick Clarke, ed. 1907, p. 460.

where he lived for the time in an imagined paradise with "doughty giants," with knights "blue, green and yellow," with fairy-folk in "merry moonshine tippling dew," and with that "last lingering fiction of the brain," the churchyard ghost. In later years, he looked back, it is true, upon his early delight in this dream-world as but "the wayward wanderings" of youth, and saw in its illusions, when tried by the riches of actual life, but "the shadows of a shade." Yet transient as was this literary joy, it is with full sense of its meaning in his own experience that the singer of reality says:—

"Ah! happy he who thus, in magic themes,  
O'er worlds bewitch'd in early rapture dreams,  
Where wild Enchantment waves her potent wand,  
And Fancy's beauties fill her fairy land;  
Where doubtful objects strange desires excite,  
And Fear and Ignorance afford delight."<sup>1</sup>

Too matter-of-fact in interest and too resolute in courage to remain long under the enchantment of the fictitious world in which his childhood had reveled, Crabbe soon turned all his energy to the study of the life around him. But his brief incursion into the realm of the wonderful must have sent him back to look with freshened vision on the scenes of familiar hardship and toil; without this escape into the freer and happier regions of the imaginative it is even possible that his poetic energy might have slackened or died in the depression of his daily life.

The conditions of Crabbe's childhood were in many ways like those of Burns and Carlyle, both of whom were of humble birth and deeply influenced by early circumstances. Yet the difference in the situations of the three was greater than the likeness. Though the iron of necessity entered into their souls, both Burns and Carlyle found in the homes of their fathers a heroic simplicity that was a main source of their later strength. The world of Crabbe's youth, lacking in the elements of moral as of material beauty, made no such appeal to his imagination or affection and left him no such heritage of

<sup>1</sup> *The Library*, 565-70, *et passim*.

noble memories as inspired *The Cotter's Saturday Night* and the incomparable portrait of the deep-natured James Carlyle. Indeed, it must have seemed when in 1780 he resolved to go to London to seek his fortune, that the first twenty-five years of his life had been little less than wasted; he had, so far, failed in everything he had undertaken, and when he left his native place he had barely five pounds in his pocket. But this story of ill-fortune was after all only half his tale: he had won the confidence of a few friends and the love of the young woman who had had the courage to engage herself to him during his apprenticeship at Woodbridge; above all, though life had so far brought him neither ease nor success, it had done much to develop his peculiar imaginative qualities and to strengthen the resolution and courage that enabled him to endure difficulties which he could not overcome.

For courage, in spite of his natural hardihood and the constant help of the family of his betrothed, he had abundant need in the year spent by him in London. He had, in fact, come to the end of his resources and was on the verge of imprisonment for debt, when, probably in February or March of 1781, he wrote the letter to Burke that marked the turning-point in his career. Burke responded to his appeal at once and generously. Through his influence *The Library* was published in July, and Crabbe, notwithstanding his formal deficiencies of education, was ordained as a clergyman before the end of the year. With his establishment in a profession for which he was peculiarly fitted, and in which he was destined to a long period of relative happiness, the qualities won in the unequal struggles of his youth first fully developed. His pedestrian virtues — the integrity, refinement of nature, and wide, though irregular, knowledge — which he had brought from Aldborough and which seemed to Burke to justify his entrance into the ministry, had had no small share in setting his feet in the paths of pleasantness. His character as a poet was, moreover, no less fully developed than his character as a man; *The Village*, possibly begun before his acquaintance with

Burke and certainly finished soon after his short curacy at Aldborough, proves how truly he had found himself and how clearly he had marked out the field of his later poetic work. The tragedies he had seen around him, from the moral disintegration in his own home to the sorrows of the paupers for whom he had cared in the almshouse at Aldborough, had immeasurably strengthened in him the springs of that melancholy tenderness, that pity touched with resignation, which was perhaps his strongest feeling about the human lot. This profound sense of the meaning of life gave depth to the clearness of vision that made him one of the great realists. "Watching folks's faces," like the boy Lippo Lippi, he had very early learned "the look of things," and must, whatever his circumstances, have been among the poets whose first appeal is to the eye. But the school in which he had studied had deepened his sense of the significance of the facts on which he looked, and so had made him not only a painter of manners but a critic of life.

It is the result of Crabbe's truth to conditions he knew that in *The Village* he presented the characters and activities of its inhabitants as weighed down by circumstances well-nigh intolerable. The people that he pictured were of a race hitherto unknown in literature, as unlike the peasants who inspired the lament of Goldsmith for the time that was fled, or the delight of Burns in love and liberty, as they were to the visionary creatures of the pastoral, with whom, in his revolt against the falsity of romance, Crabbe contrasted them. Nor did they bear even a remote resemblance to the shepherd-folk then living in parts of Scotland and England who were a few years later to give Wordsworth example and earnest of a modern age of gold: men tilling their ancestral fields, bound by countless pieties to the land, and forming an essential part of the society to which they belonged. The people whom Crabbe described in *The Village* lived in conditions absolutely different from those of their literary contemporaries; they earned at best less than a livelihood, toiled in the midst of a nature hopelessly poverty-stricken and sterile, and, without regular employment or social

responsibility, were at once a menace to the community and a witness to its failure. Crushed beneath the burdens of poverty, and starved in mind, body, and estate, they appear in the poem characterless and ignoble, their individuality well-nigh reduced to the conditions which surrounded it. There is variety in Crabbe's pictures of village life, as the gloom is now brightened by the "frail joys"<sup>1</sup> of an hour of leisure or darkened by the woe of loss or crime; but this variety only flickers for an instant against the prevailing hopelessness. The solidarity of the people is a solidarity in enduring the wrongs of nature, of fortune and of vice.

Yet the isolating misery that subdues the characters and lives of the poor to its own monotony does not take them out of the pale of humanity; it rather heightens that sense of community of nature between them and their more fortunate fellows which brings their sordid experiences within the range of a genuine human sympathy. The kinship proclaimed by the poet, especially in his earlier years, was, it is true, oftenest a kinship in weakness and vice; the moral with which he adorned his tales was that of the social satirist of the eighteenth century. He wrote of lowly life as it is, he says:—

"To show the great, those mightier sons of pride,  
How near in vice the lowest are allied;

So shall the man of power and pleasure see  
In his own slave as vile a wretch as he;  
In his luxurious lord the servant find  
His own low pleasures and degenerate mind:  
And each in all the kindred vices trace  
Of a poor, blind, bewilder'd, erring race."<sup>2</sup>

But though he could be trite enough when he drew his moral, Crabbe's instinct as an artist was far truer than his explanation of his purpose. He shows in his portraits of the villagers the touch of nature that makes them the kin of the whole world. "The shadow that rested on the life of the English poor in his generation," formed, according to Professor Woodberry, the

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, II, 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-98.

ground of his painting.<sup>1</sup> But even in the pictures where this shadow lies heaviest, we feel its darkness chiefly because those lying under it are men of like passions with ourselves; and, because we see ourselves in them, we first become aware of the tragic meaning of their degraded and sorrow-stricken lives.

The sympathy and fidelity that made *The Village* so remorseless a picture of a social class that had hitherto lain outside the range of poetry led Crabbe, as his experience widened, to a more varied knowledge of character and to a corresponding change of poetic form. He continued to be especially the poet of the poor, not only because, as he says himself, "they must be considered, in every place, as a large and interesting portion of its inhabitants,"<sup>2</sup> but because by sympathy and experience he held the key to the understanding of their hearts. But the poor in his later work no longer formed a class apart: their monotonous fortunes were relieved — and intensified — by contrast with men of happier worldly estate; their monotonous degradation was brightened by examples from among themselves of that wise self-control and resignation which Crabbe, like Wordsworth, regarded as the measure of human happiness. As his subject-matter widened, his form became correspondingly freer and more complex. The brief sketches of *The Village*, in which character was wholly illustrative of general conditions, were followed in *The Parish Register*, a poem written after a silence of twenty-two years, by the presentation of more highly individualized types, grouped together by the particular events of birth or death or marriage.

This advance toward a more varied and discriminating presentation of his material indicates the trend of Crabbe's later development. The unity of *The Borough* consists in little more than the enveloping atmosphere that surrounds the scenes, while in the *Tales* and the *Tales of the Hall* the attempt to connect them even through the shadowy personality of a common narrator or listener is given up. Crabbe pointed out the inner

<sup>1</sup> "Crabbe," *Makers of Literature*, ed. 1900, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to *The Borough*, ed. 1905, vol. I, p. 277.

relationship connecting the *Tales*, when he explained his disregard of a recommendation, "from authority which neither inclination nor prudence" led him to resist, to arrange the material of his new work, if not in the form of an epic poem, yet at least in a form that would have epic unity of purpose and development. The characters at his disposal, he said, though they "were not such as would coalesce into one body, nor were of a nature to be commanded by one mind," yet did not on examination appear "as an unconnected multitude, accidentally collected, to be suddenly dispersed; but rather beings of whom might be formed groups and smaller societies, the relations of whose adventures and pursuits might bear that kind of similitude to an Heroic Poem, which these minor associations of men (as pilgrims on the way to their saint, or parties in search of amusement, travellers excited by curiosity, or adventurers in pursuit of gain), have in points of connexion and importance with a regular and disciplined army."<sup>1</sup>

The freedom and elaboration of treatment in the two sets of *Tales* and even in *The Borough*, allowed for a more detailed analysis of motives and for the presentation of more elusive qualities than was possible with the definite outline of *The Parish Register*. Yet, in spite of their difference in method, these later works show no deeper understanding of human nature than do the earlier, with their unsophisticated people revealing themselves in stories of brutal passion and heroic endurance, of wise thrift and mean ostentation, of wrong lightly inflicted and sin bitterly expiated. The fortunes of these simple characters move us quickly to pity, to terror, to disgust with the unadorned ugliness of their follies, or to admiration of their unreflecting and courageous goodness. It would be hard to match for concentrated pathos the story of Phebe Dawson;<sup>2</sup> for squalid repulsiveness the "preposterous love" of the aged bride and groom, tottering and toying before the altar;<sup>3</sup> for pious kindliness the picture of the schoolmistress, the embodiment

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Tales*, ed. 1905, vol. II, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *The Parish Register*, II, 130-244.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 360 *et passim*.

of rustic tenderness, frugality and authority, before whom the passing village-lads

"In pure respect walk silent on the grass."<sup>1</sup>

The later stories supplement this portrayal of simple character with studies of complex spiritual situations or pictures of slow spiritual deterioration. But the ravages of evil are none the less evident because the subtler self-seeking depicted in them seems at first glance utterly trivial, or because the wrong-doer escapes the merely physical punishment that is his due. The dallying Henry, victim of his father's cupidity and his own weakness, declines from his love for Cecilia to the easy caresses of the pliant Fanny, only to find his fitting reward in long submission to the "fond, teasing, anxious wife," who

"Lives but t' entreat, implore, resent, accuse."<sup>2</sup>

Sir Owen Dale, deserving, at least till his conversion, the title of "the Egoist in little," sinks to the basest cruelty, while boasting as justice the vengeance into which his thwarted passion has been transformed. Nor was Crabbe content to track folly and sin through their mazes of casuistry and self-deceit; with equal sureness he interpreted the goodness without guile that passes unscathed through fiery trials. There is perhaps no character in literature that shows more convincingly than Ellen Orford the power of the human heart, not only to resist evil, but to grow in spite of it in the beauty of inner integrity. Her goodness is as absolute, her character as essentially simple as that of the "noble Peasant," Isaac Ashford, —

"A wise good man, contented to be poor,"<sup>3</sup> —

who is her prototype in *The Parish Register*. Not only do we see in Ellen the picture of a nature beautiful in its nobility, but we come to understand through her quiet telling of a tragic story the long self-renunciation and devotion, the much-tried faith and love that have made her what she is.

<sup>1</sup> *The Parish Register*, I, 605-6.

<sup>2</sup> "Delay has Danger," *Tales of the Hall*, XIII, 738.

<sup>3</sup> *The Parish Register*, III, 502.

Crabbe's statement that his characters were beings of whom groups might be formed touched the essentially social nature of his conception of life. He conceived of no such thing as an isolated individual. His profound interest in the concrete led him to study men so closely that he saw them as part and parcel of the world to which they belonged. His people smack of the soil in which they have grown, and are intimately related to each other, as well as to that larger society whose creatures they are, however unconscious of the fact they may be. Thus we find in his poems a complete as well as a detailed picture of the age. The sketches in *The Village* have been described as forming a realistic epic of country life. The stories of *The Parish Register*, each suggested by the record of births, marriages or deaths, form an extraordinary series in which is embodied the whole life of the community. *The Borough* leaves hardly a moral or a social problem unstated in its review of the circumstances as well as of the inhabitants of the town. A writer in *Blackwood's* said of the *Tales of the Hall*, in the year of their publication, that they gave a general view "of the moral character of the people of England."<sup>1</sup> And the later works, chiefly, like the *Tales*, novelettes in verse, though without the concentration of the earlier poems, furnish even more abundant material for a true *comédie humaine*.

Nor was Crabbe satisfied to set before us the physical and moral aspects of the England of his day; with his unfailing truth to reality and his vivid sense of the relation of one part of life to another, he shows in people and circumstances the causes that have made them what they are. It is by the remorseless presentation of evil working in and through existing institutions that, in spite of the difference between them in theory, he complements the work of the radical reformers of his day. He is, indeed, an even more convincing preacher than they, in that his constant appeal to facts saves him from any appearance of extenuation or of exaggeration. The environment in which his characters grow and act is the complex

<sup>1</sup> "Crabbe's Tales of the Hall," vol. v, July, 1819.

environment of real life, seen as reacting on and shaping human destinies. In the unhappy community of *The Village* all physical, moral, and social forces work together for evil, which relentlessly overmasters every possibility of happiness or well-being. But even in the darkest of his pictures the material want that impels the poor to vice is less significant than the ignorance, perversity, and self-deceit which makes them the inevitable victims of poverty. In Crabbe's later work there are numerous characters, only apparently more fortunate than the rest in their exemption from the degradation of utter poverty, who yet do not escape the depraving influence of a sordid moral environment. But though material necessity was seen by Crabbe as but one of the forces that shape men's lives, he was too true to his own experience to forget for a moment the peculiar weight that hopeless poverty lays on the human spirit. It saddens, if it does not subdue, even those stronger souls, who, in spite of sinister circumstance, achieve the serenity that is substantial happiness; it forms an undertone of tragic pathos in Ellen Orford's meek acceptance of her portion, or in Isaac Ashford's haunting fear that he may live to endure the humiliation of the almshouse.

Crabbe's perception of the relation existing between character and outer circumstance made him an admirable, if unconscious, critic of social institutions. Of these institutions none apparently interested him so deeply and continuously as did the almshouses. The attempt to alleviate the increasing poverty of the time by the establishment of almshouses would doubtless in any case have aroused Crabbe's interest, even if his experience as physician to the poor in Aldborough had not given him early and intimate knowledge, both of the misery existing in these last refuges for the unfortunate and of the infinite diversity of character among inmates and care-takers. Miserable as it was in itself, he thought the almshouse of his day doubly accursed in that it was the cause of wide-spread and degrading wretchedness, — whether to the weak and old who could hardly hope to escape its "final woe";

to the homes broken up by its enforced bounty; or to the careless patrons, overseers and servants, who, heartlessly dispensing "the cold charities of man to man," paid the penalty of self-seeking in a soured and hardened humanity. The diversity of the characters that gathered around it was with the fewest exceptions a diversity in evil. The wrecks of society who filled its walls, the victims of their own sins or those of others, were certainly no worse, though infinitely weaker, than those who cared for them.

It is of course in *The Village* that the almshouse is pictured in its most brutal form. The ruinous building,

"Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door,"<sup>1</sup>

shelters a motley company, alike only in misfortune:—

"There children dwell, who know no parents' care;  
Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there!  
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,  
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;  
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,  
And crippled age with more than childhood fears;  
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!  
The moping idiot and the madman gay."<sup>2</sup>

But this abode of misery is not too mean to be the prey of parish priest and doctor and nurse. The callousness of these mercenary attendants appears perhaps most baldly at the deathbed of the old pauper, the former comrade and still the friend of the villagers. To the cold, dark, rafter-lined, ill-furnished room where the dying man lies "on a matted flock with dust o'er-spread," hurries the doctor, possibly Crabbe's predecessor or rival in Aldborough, —

"All pride and business, bustle and conceit;  
With looks unalter'd by these scenes of woe,  
With speed that, entering, speaks his haste to go."<sup>3</sup>

Beside him stands the parish priest, —

"A jovial youth, who thinks his Sunday's task  
As much as God or man can fairly ask."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, I, 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-7.

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Needless to say, his ministrations are of the most perfunctory. Haled hither by "the murmuring nurse" from an hour of love or sport,

"The holy stranger to these dismal walls,"<sup>1</sup>

hardly deigns to speak a word of comfort to the soul troubled about his title to eternal joy. And even on the day of the funeral, "detained by weightier care," he puts off the reading of the services to the following Sunday, while the pauper's humble friends follow his body to the grave, lamenting that "a poor man's bones should lie unbliss'd."<sup>2</sup>

The squalid misery and heartlessness of the village almshouse stands alone even among Crabbe's grim pictures. His later studies characteristically paint the more subtle and elusive, though no less far-reaching, results of the workhouse system. In *The Parish Register*, its baleful influence is traced in the career of Richard Monday, the waif committed to its care. The boy,

"Sad, silent, supple; bending to the blow,"<sup>3</sup>

is quickly taught by the base usage of his tyrants to cringe, to lie, to bully, to provide for himself, and to rise in favor even when he falls in fame. At last going "abroad" from this ignoble school, he finds his talents so fit to cope with the world —

"He'd no small cunning, and had some small wit"<sup>4</sup> —

that he dies a baronet and the founder of a wealthy family, the thrifty dispenser of benefits to charities and missions, yet, in his self-seeking prosperity, bearing the stamp of meanness imprinted in him by the "vile employ" of his youth.

The same evil agencies are seen at work in the poorhouse of *The Borough*, different in type as it is from that in which the boy Richard was so basely bred, or from that in which the aged Villager drew his last breath. Instead of the ruinous cottage-almshouse of the smaller town, the Borough boasts a noble building, the gift of self-denying love; instead of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Village*, 301.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>3</sup> *The Parish Register*, I, 715.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 742.

petty rule of the parish officers the inmates have intelligent care from the town's best citizens. And yet this well-appointed dwelling is still hateful to the poor, who find its cold order empty of all that makes life worth while: the greeting of a passing friend, the sharing of a story lately learned, even the solace of suffering in familiar scenes. Neither the kindness of the givers nor the better material conditions established by them have eradicated the selfishness and vain pride of the overseers, more subtle but not less absolute than that of their humbler counterparts. From the doctor and priest of the village almshouse to Sir Denys Brand is a far call; but though Sir Denys lived simply and enriched the town with his benefactions, he is as lacking as his prototypes in the humanity that would lead him

"In some soft moment, to be kind to one";<sup>1</sup>

he is as worldly in dispensing charity as they had been self-seeking in their offices. And what but the larger scope of their iniquities marks the inmates of "the pauper palace" as different from those of the tumbledown almshouse? Surely there is no moral advance in Benbow, the "boon companion, long approved by jovial sets," who boasts his past wickedness while complaining to his fellow pensioners that he lives

"To breathe in pain among the dead alive."<sup>2</sup>

And there is none in Blaney, "that old licentious boy," who joins the nefarious Clelia in dilating on the joys and sins of former days and rejoicing that they had

"... their last guinea in their pleasures spent,  
Yet never fell so low as to repent."<sup>3</sup>

The moral of the whole is plain: no provision for material well-being can redeem from its fundamental inhumanity a system which respects neither the tastes nor the duties of the recipients, and which unites in a purely artificial society people whom inclinations, habits, and capacities have in no way fitted to live together. The flaunting triumph of the vicious, the degrada-

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, XIII, 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 229.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII, 332-3.

tion of the gentle and the young, the dull misery of the stranger in strange scenes, the cheerlessness of existence,

“With nothing dreadful, but with nothing new,”<sup>1</sup>

all urge the right of every human being to pass his life in natural conditions and to share the joys and sorrows of the common lot.

Crabbe’s study of the isolated, artificial society of the almshouse, exhaustive as it was, forms a far less significant part of his work than his pictures of the poor in their own homes, where, however they suffered, they were bound to their kind by an infinite number of natural ties, and where their ordinary environment and their natural capacities for good and evil are most clearly seen. Though it is in the description of their homes — so-called — that Crabbe’s moral code, rooted in an industrial system even then passing, is most effectually discredited, and the need of reform in England perhaps most clearly seen, those homes are far from being monotonously sad. The greater number lie, it is true, under the shadow of hopeless poverty, but there is to be found among them many a vine-clad cottage, the frugal, industrious owner of which has, by fortune and virtue, won a humble prosperity. The description of such a dwelling is humorously cheerful. Its low walls are adorned by prints of kings and prize cattle, of romantic legends and battles glorious to England, hanging side by side and teaching each its lesson of patriotism and morality.

“On shelf of deal, beside the cuckoo-clock,”<sup>2</sup>

rest the books that give their unlearned readers all they ask, —

“The tale for wonder and the joke for whim,  
The half-sung sermon and the half-groan’d hymn.”<sup>3</sup>

Outside there is the garden patch, which not only yields the industrious cottager vegetables and herbs, fruit and nuts, but has room for a little plot, the special object of his pride and care,

“Where rich carnations, pinks with purple eyes,  
Proud hyacinths, the least some florist’s prize,  
Tulips tall-stemm’d and pounced auriculas rise.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, xviii, 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–6.

<sup>3</sup> *The Parish Register*, 1, 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 149–51.

Crabbe doubtless rejoiced as an artist in the simple beauty of these "fair scenes of peace," while as a thinker he found in them the exemplification of his moral code, the practical sanction for his belief that honesty, industry and frugality, unless under exceptional circumstances, lead to happiness; that the evident evils of poverty come, for the most part,

"From want of virtuous will,  
Of honest shame, of time-improving skill;  
For want of care t' employ the vacant hour,  
And want of ev'ry kind but want of power." <sup>1</sup>

But he was too skilled an observer and too sensitive to the darker possibilities of life, to find in these almost pastoral cottages more than the occasional brightening of a somber picture; he habitually turns from them to those far more numerous dwellings wherein seemed to be centered the social tragedy of the age. The most compact description of the surroundings to which the poor are condemned is given in *The Parish Register*. There is inducement to nothing but vice in the "infected row" where

"hungry dogs from hungry children steal;  
There pigs and chickens quarrel for a meal;  
There dropsied infants wail without redress,  
And all is want and wo and wretchedness." <sup>2</sup>

The dirt and refuse on every side, the offense that

"Invades all eyes and strikes on every sense," <sup>3</sup>

are infinitely less terrible than the miserable crowds that throng the street; "the sot, the cheat, the shrew," the beaten wife and hungry children, the boy thief and the girl drunkard and prostitute.

And even worse than the streets are the houses in which this motley wretchedness finds nightly shelter. Nothing could be more hideous than the scenes which Crabbe, in the spirit of the physician to whom he likens himself,<sup>4</sup> asks us to visit. The dirt, assailing sight and smell; the crowded rooms that make

<sup>1</sup> *The Parish Register*, I, 227-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

innocence, and even decency, impossible; the greasy cards and obscene ballads that serve to while away the vacant days and nights; the openly displayed implements of theft and murder; the drunkenness that battens on the smuggled flask, — all together testify to a misery and neglect that formed a genuine social menace. The wretchedness that in the Parish is collected in a single street or "row," situated in the midst of a friendly country, is in the Borough further heightened by contrast with the wealth of a large town. The "door-side heaps" and rank growth of weeds, the tumbledown houses and dirty paths, the groups of slatternly women and quarreling children that fill the alleyways, differ only in number from those of the Parish. Vestiges of former greatness in pretentious but neglected buildings, and the nearness of flaunting luxury join to make the meanness of the town's poverty more intolerable. And the very size of the larger town creates one of its peculiar evils, the huge lodging-house that collects, and, by collecting, multiplies its scattered crime and misery. Nor does this ill-omened shelter confine its evil influence to the poor it harbors. The house, a "long boarded building," bought in its decay by "a humorist," — "ill was the humour," says our guide, — wrought harm both by offering an asylum to deceit and guilt and by strengthening its owner in a hypocritical philanthropy which is the very sophistry of greed. Having bought the place, this

"Convert to system his vain mind has built,"<sup>1</sup>

convinces himself that he is using it for the benefit of the poor: —

"They may be thieves;" — "Well, so are richer men;" —

"Or idlers, cheats or prostitutes;" — "What then?" —

"Outcasts pursued by justice, vile and base;" —

"They need the more his pity and the place."<sup>2</sup>

The evil of this neglected neighborhood is the more nearly irremediable because these "sinks and sewers" of the town are cut off from any saving intercourse with its better forces. The

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, XVIII, 342.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-41.

reformer never meddles with them, and the unsightly refuse and untended walks are but the visible signs of a moral and spiritual apathy that leaves the people in the desolation of outer darkness and makes the huge lodging-house even more baleful in its anti-social influence than the worst of the almshouses.

None of the activities of Crabbe's England is so revelatory of character as the amusements in which young and old, rich and poor engage. The recreations of the poor are inevitably bound up with the scenes of their daily occupations, while the well-to-do, like the well-to-do everywhere and always, seek diversion at home or abroad according to their mood. But in either case the pleasure is moulded to the nature of the pleasure-seeker, and thus becomes the truest index of his worth. The whole life of the Village is concentrated in the pathetic picture of its Sunday holiday, when the scanty leisure allowed for rest and the brief joys which alone can flourish in so poor a soil, are desecrated by the drunkenness, brutality and malice of the Villagers themselves. The children in the midst of these evil surroundings snatching in their hours of play a passing happiness thrill us to sympathy, now for the doom of those so manifestly born to degradation, now for the hope that springs everywhere with life. In the great common room of the Borough lodging-house where

"Need and misery, vice and danger bind  
In sad alliance each degraded mind."<sup>1</sup>

the light-heartedness of childhood finds its opportunity; and while their elders console themselves with gin and snuff and tea, with indecent stories and games of chance,

"Boys, without foresight, pleased in halters swing."<sup>2</sup>

But we rebel against the severity of the implied judgment when we see those same boys, "Rodneys in rags" and "lisping Nelsons," launching their ships in the stagnant puddles that border the wretched street and watching the tossing navies with delight,

"When inch-high billows vex the watery world."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, xviii, 352-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

While the play of the children so clearly shows their twofold possibilities, the amusements of their elders reveal, under all differences of class and calling, the human kinship of men and women of every condition. The brutal indulgence of the degraded poor is of like nature with the luxurious dissipations of the wealthy; the idle rich who, vacant of motive and interest, meet together to eat and drink, or while away their time at the whist-table or the play, differ only in superficial refinement from the criminals and paupers, who in hovel or alehouse seek a like forgetfulness. With amusements as such, Crabbe seems to have had a tolerant, if somewhat distant, sympathy. He stops for instance, after a satiric account of an evening at a club, to moralize on the benefit that comes from such meetings:—

“ Yet there’s a good that flows from scenes like these—  
Man meets with man at leisure and at ease;  
We to our neighbors and our equals come,  
And rub off pride that man contracts at home;  
.  
.  
.  
Here all the value of a listener know,  
And claim, in turn, the favour they bestow.”<sup>1</sup>

Such reflections, however, seem rather a conventional echo of the language of the day, than the result of any deep conviction in Crabbe. For the most part his descriptions of the diversions in which rich and poor everywhere sought enjoyment, bring the severest of indictments against the civilization that made such pleasures alluring. Nor can we forget their significance if we would. The trivial or degrading recreations of all classes stand out against a background often menacing enough: the excursion to ocean or country takes the pleasure-seeker through the unkempt land lying around the town and offending sight and smell with its reek; as the revelers return to their homes, the shout of a drunken sailor, passing noisily, breaks the stillness of the night, or the ocean blackens with the destroying storm.

But the important conclusions to be drawn from Crabbe’s

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, x, 79-92.

poetry remain implicit; he devoted himself unremittingly to the study of facts, presenting them to us as they were and leaving them to tell their own story. He was not only indifferent to theory, but deprecated any general use of the speculative faculty as likely to lead to evil. His own position in regard to questions of theology he states clearly, when, in describing the sects of the Borough, he passes from the "pleasing vision" of its Swedenborgians to say in his own person, and in words singularly characteristic of his own point of view:—

"To the plain words and sense of sacred writ,  
With all my heart I reverently submit;  
But, where it leaves me doubtful, I'm afraid  
To call conjecture to my reason's aid;  
Thy thoughts, thy ways, great God! are not as mine,  
And to thy mercy I my soul resign."<sup>1</sup>

This submission "to the plain words and sense of sacred writ" was hardly more marked in Crabbe than was his deference to the inherited wisdom and established opinion of mankind. He was as firmly convinced as was Burke or Coleridge of the weakness of the individual understanding in its struggle after truth. Freedom to think for one's self, if we may judge from his treatment of character, he regarded as at best a doubtful benefit, a liberty tolerably sure to impair the moral integrity of those who exercised it. Speculative thought he thus naturally associated with all that is subversive of good. His characters illustrate every phase of the evil wrought by the revolutionist and the sectarian, or suffered by the individualist who will follow the inner light of reason rather than conform to the collective wisdom of the community. He frequently deprecates the reading of Paine and Voltaire and other authors associated with the cause of freedom, as tending by their appeal to individual judgment to turn men of the lighter sort to iniquity; and while he was profoundly conscious of the need of reform, he had apparently small sympathy with any but immediately prac-

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, iv, 204-9.

tical plans for improving evil conditions. Yet his antagonism to speculation, perhaps because of his position as a clergyman of the established church and his interest in the conditions of lower and middle-class English life, was called forth far less by the social or political philosophers than by the sectarian preachers of the day. These he regarded as a great power for perverting the minds and morals of the people, and in consequence was peculiarly severe in dealing with their shortcomings.

He had, as beffitted his office, a keen eye for the foibles of the regular clergy. He does not spare the village priest who presides in the drunken tavern scene, or finds in whist or tea an excuse for deferring the funeral services of a pauper. No one of his pictures is more humorous than that of the popular vicar, the "male lily" of fashionable taste, who as he sips tea with his fair parishioners delights to join in "the town small-talk," and cull from the admiring circle a fresh store of

"Intrigues half-gather'd, conversation-scrapes,  
Kitchen-cabals and nursery-mishaps."<sup>1</sup>

whose desire to please is tempered by a fear to offend, the softness of whose discourses is purchased at the price of force, who finds in habit "all the test of truth,"<sup>2</sup> whose mind is exercised chiefly in his chosen arts of fiddling or fishing, sometimes in altering sermons or making rhymes. But the faults of so characterless a character are at worst conventional vices, allying the priest with the easy society in which he lives. The dissenting ministers are of a different and far more dangerous type. The worst of them is the sensualist, who uses his religion and his ministry as the cloak of iniquity; who, like the weaver-preacher in *Ruth*,

"beneath a show  
Of peevish zeal, let carnal wishes grow;  
Proud and yet mean, forbidding and yet full  
Of eager appetites, devout and dull."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, III, 71-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>3</sup> *Tales of the Hall*, v, 380-3.

The personal immorality of some sectarian preachers is not, however, like their teaching, characteristic of them as a class. They sin, and cause sin, primarily by disseminating false doctrine: by their declaration of short and easy methods of conversion, by their scorn of morality and their pernicious belief in free grace, — in short by spreading abroad among their hearers ideas subversive of any genuine virtue. Nothing in Crabbe's eyes is more perilous than belief in a salvation that rests on faith rather than works, in the name of which one of them,

"Borne up and swell'd by tabernacle-gas,"<sup>1</sup>

scoffs at the parish preacher's call to his flock to "turn to God, and mend," and asks, —

"Can grace be gradual ? Can conversion grow ?  
The work is done by instantaneous call;  
Converts at once are made or not at all;  
Then can no fortune for the soul be made  
By peddling cares and savings in her trade."<sup>2</sup>

Such doctrines as these appear and reappear in Crabbe's poems, either as the actual motive of wrong-doing or as the solvent of all right habit and principle. Those

"who preach'd of destiny and fate,  
Of things fore-doom'd, and of election-grace,"<sup>3</sup>

were largely responsible for the mental darkness from which Ellen Orford's husband sought refuge in suicide. The perilous doctrine of dissenting preachers first led John Dighton, the convert,

"who by his feelings found,  
And by them only, that his faith was sound,"<sup>4</sup>

to cloak self-seeking in the guise of religion; then lured him, on the plea that "his teachers had their stains," to exchange this faith for an irresponsible skepticism, "the danger of the free," and finally plunged him into a despair from which no sounder belief might rescue him.

<sup>1</sup> *The Borough*, iv, 271.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx, 235-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Tales*, xix, 87-8.

Crabbe's utterances on revolutionary and social questions, though much less frequent and less decided than those upon religious matters, are marked by the same spirit. Here he inclines to identify conservatism with practice and radicalism with theory. M. Huchon contrasts his description of the Tory Justice Bolt with that of the radical orator Hammond, and concludes: "If a choice had to be made, Crabbe would evidently prefer Bolt, the Tory magistrate. But he likes neither and humiliates both."<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a significant difference in his descriptions of the two men. Bolt, the very type of the conservative, joined to experience and native sense

"a bold imperious eloquence;  
The grave, stern look of men inform'd and wise,  
A full command of feature, heart, and eyes,  
An awe-compelling frown, and fear-inspiring size."<sup>2</sup>

Absurd in a patriotism that found in church and state naught "for man to mend or to restore," he yet has many of the qualities of the man of sense. Hammond is physically and mentally of lighter calibre. His themes are described by the poet as "a long chain of favorite horrors," and though he heaps up instances of oppression and appeals to every humane motive, there is the coldness and vagueness of the rhetorician in every syllable pronounced by this "man of many words."

Crabbe's view of life, with its insistence on facts and indifference to principles, might easily have fallen into a crude and meaningless realism. Such realism is, indeed, the defect of his virtue, inspiring most of the commonplace passages that weigh down his poetry. At its best, however, his world of fact is unified and deepened by his apprehension of those "inner moral springs of character" of which man's life is primarily the expression. It is this penetration into the sources of character, far more than even the richness and truth of his pictures, that justifies the comparison so constantly drawn between him and Shakespeare, making him, in his infinitely less magical art and

<sup>1</sup> R. Huchon, *George Crabbe and His Times*, tr. F. Clarke, ed. 1902, p. 454.

<sup>2</sup> *Tales*, I, 54-7.

in his far more limited sphere, the revealer of those secrets of the heart on an understanding of which the sense of human kinship so largely depends. Walter Savage Landor, comparing him with Young, says that, instead of moralizing at a distance on some aspect of the human heart, he "entered it *on all fours*, and told the people what an ugly thing it is inside."<sup>1</sup> A generation brought up on *Père Goriot* and *The Egoist* recognizes the truth rather than the ugliness of his revelations, and sees in him perhaps the subtlest psychologist of his time, the fore-runner of those searchers of character and motive who in the nineteenth century so greatly enriched the knowledge of our kind. But Crabbe, though the psychologist of his age, was not a psychologist after its fashion. He never demonstrated such a thesis in perverted morality as that of *Caleb Williams*, or attempted to present such a monstrous conception as Wordsworth's in *The Borderers*. Nor was he especially interested in the phases of experience that chiefly attracted his contemporaries; he cared nothing for the elementary and primitive mental operations as such; he was more than suspicious of all mystical emotions; he early turned his back on the world of romance, and he had little sympathy with any aspirations for freedom of life or thought. He was literally absorbed in studying the lives of real people, and he never paused in his pursuit of any character until he had mastered the springs of its action. Professor Woodberry says that he saw "only a few and comparatively simple operations of human nature — the working of country-bred minds, not finely or complexly organized, but slow-motioned, and perplexed, if perplexed at all, not from the difficulty of the problem, but from their own dullness."<sup>2</sup> But these "country-bred minds," though slow and fumbling in their mental processes, have a certain sturdy individuality that both attracts and rewards the student of character. Absolutely lacking in superficial subtlety of mind and heart, they yet, through the concentration of their energy on a few simple

<sup>1</sup> "Southey and Porson," *Imaginary Conversations*, ed. 1891, vol. III, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> "Crabbe," *Makers of Literature*, ed. 1900, p. 101.

problems of life and in a single sphere of activity, gain a depth and variety of experience wanting in those whose energies are dissipated or who are drawn from their true bent by larger and more various opportunities. Human nature is at best an instrument of few strings; and though their language is prosaic and their garb commonplace, there is hardly a power or a passion that does not flourish in utmost vigor or even in highest refinement among the Englishmen of the lower or middle class whom Crabbe has pictured in his verse.

Crabbe's penetration into the inner qualities of characters hitherto featureless and inexpressive in literature made him in a very real sense the poet of the people in his own day. He was by no means blind to the terrible or extraordinary in situation or experience; his understanding of strange phases of passion needs no further proof than the story of Sir Eustace Grey, who, pouring out his tale to a chance visitor in the asylum where he is confined, passes in his insane delirium from despair lest his soul be lost, through the ecstasy of religious exaltation, to a most worldly delusion that he is still the arbiter of his own fortune. But the romantic soul-lore of this poem is less significant, as well as less characteristic of Crabbe, than is his presentation of the uneventful lives of men habitually silent as to their own deeper emotions. The tragedy that he was among the first to see is the tragedy that lives in the commonplace; the truth he revealed is the truth that unfolds itself in the ordinary days of ordinary people.

With his distinctly contemporary material he dealt in the spirit of satirist and censor. His acceptance of an essentially social standard of conduct, as well as his emphasis upon the essentially social virtues, reminds us of the great humorists. Egoism in the disguise of folly or hypocrisy is almost as common a theme with him as with Molière and Meredith, and is handled as relentlessly. Among the most naïve of his egoists is the thrice-widowed widow, a woman inexperienced in spite of much sorrow and much happiness, who, weeping "in comfort in her graceful weeds," is

"Civil to all, compliant and polite,  
Disposed to think 'whatever is is right.'" <sup>1</sup>

Equal in simplicity is the preceptor husband, the young pedant, who in his school-days

"always took  
The girl to dance who most admired her book," <sup>2</sup>

and yet, ignorant of character as of wisdom, married a woman without taste or knowledge, ready at mention of a poet's name to boast of her reading in Pope or Milton or Shakespeare.

"They were our lessons, and, at ten years old,  
I could repeat — but now enough is told." <sup>3</sup>

Such pictures of the naïve self-illusion of folly are perhaps Crabbe's nearest approach to humor. Yet even in them the touch of reality, however slight it may be, suggests the tragic irony that marks his study of the bolder and more remorseless egoist. For, even in his satiric moods, Crabbe was never long unmoved by that sense of humanity which lies at the heart of life and gives a sorry pathos to the moral failure of the most ignoble or self-indulgent.

Through his profound knowledge of the England of his day Crabbe became, in spite of his indifference to contemporary speculative thought, hardly less the poet of the new democracy than were Wordsworth and Shelley. Where they showed what should be, evoking from past or future examples for the present, Crabbe told what was. In spite of his theological belief in the power of man to overcome evil, he never flinched from the portrayal of lives mastered by circumstances that actually lay outside their power. Poverty, though in his moralizing moments he might glibly declare it the result of the sufferer's sin, is seen in his poetry as a social blight threatening the physical and moral integrity of England. It is everywhere the fruitful source of evil; the few who escape its degradation are saved so as by fire, and virtue and happiness, in which, as truly as Carlyle and Ruskin, he places the wealth of nations, are disintegrated by

<sup>1</sup> *Tales of the Hall*, xvii, 523-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 371-2.

its touch. His indictment of it is hardly less strong than Maeterlinck's. Want not only makes impossible outer beauty and decency of life; it is potent among the forces that destroy morality and kindliness; it vies with passion in degrading marriage; it strikes at the roots of that pride and independence which give stability to character; it darkens the happiness of the strong and brings the weak under the yoke of fanaticism or debauchery.

But the same integrity of vision that made him present the effects of poverty so mercilessly kept him from painting partial portraits of the poor in which they appear solely as victims of the lot it was their fate to endure. His characters not only reflect their environment, but influence it. They are not only the creatures of circumstance, but in their turn they help to shape the world in which they act; they are, at least to a degree, responsible for their conduct and in control of their destinies. It is this presentation of free individuality, the assertion not only of a right to live but of a power of living, that makes Crabbe's poetry a landmark in the developing sympathy of the century. It is not because of their poverty, but in right of their firm resolution, essential refinement, and capacity for suffering, that many of his heroes take their place among those of earlier literature and interpret the class to which they belong through the revelation of human possibility. These, like the weaker characters, accept unquestioningly the portion that life gives them. Their fate is so inevitable that struggle is transformed in the nobler sort into a kind of resigned fortitude.

To this temper Ellen Orford gives typical expression. Her story recalls that of Esther Waters, both because of the "grievous, base and dreadful things" that befell her, and her matter-of-course refusal to regard them as exceptional or intolerable. The vicissitudes of her life are too many, and some of them are too terrible, to relate; yet their heaped-up agony, though it troubles, never destroys her quietness and serenity of mind, which are the result of a rare temperament and a deep religious faith. She dismisses her youth of much sorrow and

little cheer as but "a common case"; outcast and alone, she sees the mercy of heaven in the labor that renewed her strength and courage; at last, blind, bereft of all dear to her, and haunted by memories of misfortune and wickedness in husband and children, she is still content, living in the day and looking cheerfully to the morrow of her death. The strength of heart that never betrayed her sets her, in spite of failure and poverty, among the radiant souls that have mastered fate.

Something of the same fine tenacity of spirit appears in Ruth, who in character, native charm, and the pressure of untoward circumstances, inevitably reminds one of Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Betrayed by love rather than by her lover, and developed by bitterest suffering, she finds at last, through stern truth of feeling, courage to choose death rather than a degrading marriage. Her story is told by her mother, the wife of a fisherman, a woman

"To mirth, to song, to laughter loud inclined,  
And yet to bear and feel a weight of grief behind."<sup>1</sup>

With these common qualities she unites an experienced charity for all that can come to pass in human life and something of the profound wisdom of the flesh that marks Mrs. Berry in *Richard Feverel*. Ruth's story of love and temptation and sorrow becomes, when told by such a woman, only less inexorable than nature itself.

Far different from these, yet, like them, showing the reach of the humblest soul, is the story of the brutal and callous Peter Grimes, which has with some reason been called "the most powerful tragedy of remorse in the English language."<sup>2</sup> Peter

"was a sordid soul,  
Such as does murder for a meed;  
Who but for fear knows no control,  
Because his conscience, sear'd and foul,  
Feels not the import of the deed;  
One whose brute feeling ne'er aspires  
Beyond his own more brute desires."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Tales of the Hall*, v, 92-3.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Elmer More, *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. LXXXVIII, December, 1901.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from *Marmion*, on title-page of *Peter Grimes*.

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He seemed — and was — sodden in iniquity; yet when at last, the victim of haunting imaginations, he died in panic terror lest those whom he had slain should return to torture him, the greedy, cruel and sordid Peter entered, through the poignancy of his mental sufferings, into the fellowship of the ghost-haunted Richard and Macbeth, with whom the thought of the author linked him.

It is such insight as this into the depths of character that made Crabbe the spokesman of the workaday men and women of England in his time. His plain tales of plain people infinitely widen our knowledge of human life and our sympathy with it. And because the characters and conditions that he pictured give a searching criticism of the society of which they were the outgrowth, and a clear indication of the necessity for a new ordering of that society, they also reveal something of the magnitude of the reconstructive task which lay before the democracy of the early nineteenth century.

**THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF  
WORDSWORTH**



## THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF WORDSWORTH

THE *Lyrical Ballads*, like *The Shepherd's Calendar*, marks the beginning of a new era in poetry, an era in which forces hitherto in great part unrelated were united in a prophetic vision of new aims and conditions of living. The professed purpose of this little volume was modest enough. "The majority of the . . . poems," says Wordsworth in the *Advertisement* to the first edition, "are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." But the poems announced by their authors as verbal experiments were far more remarkable for the conception of human nature on which they were founded than for the theory of poetry they set out to illustrate. Wordsworth defined poetry as "the history or science of feelings,"<sup>1</sup> and it was, in fact, as material for observation and understanding, rather than for the direct presentation in which poets had always delighted, that he and Coleridge chose as the main subject-matter of their song the elementary passions and emotions, those phases of consciousness which defy analysis because intertwined with the very roots of being. To this study of the simple and universal elements of character they were drawn, both by their conviction that through perception and feeling men come most directly into contact with the ultimate realities of existence, and by their supreme interest in realms of experience hitherto taken for granted rather than explored by poets. To Wordsworth, moreover, these simple and universal elements of character had a further significance as being constructive forces in the new social order for which he looked and of which the world stood in dire need. Overwhelmed, like all thoughtful men of his generation, by the apparent moral failure

<sup>1</sup> Note to *The Thorn*, 1800.

of the Revolution, he turned, with an intellectual ardor that reminds us of Burke, from the speculative theories on which it rested to those more fundamental realities which he came to believe justified his earlier hopes for humanity.

\* ( This appeal to reality was from first to last distinctive of Wordsworth's thought. While the dreamy Coleridge and the methodic Southey were planning an ideal state, a Pantisocracy to be established on the banks of the remote and sweetly-named Susquehanna, he was studying actual conditions in France and finding in them the justification of Revolutionary principles. His contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*, the first poems of his maturity, were written in the joy of a great discovery, the discovery that men he had familiarly known, men lowly in station but of supreme moral dignity, had long since attained to the salvation he was seeking afar. Before the second edition was published, he had not only reflected deeply on the significance of his new faith, but had formulated the ideas that were to determine everything that he afterwards thought and wrote. In the *Preface* of 1800 we accordingly find a much fuller statement of his poetic purpose than in the earlier *Advertisement*. In this preface he tells us, not only that he proposed to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout in a selection of the language really used by men, but that he believed the scenes of humble and rustic life to be the true subject-matter of poetry, for the following reasons: because "in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language"; because in it "our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated"; because "the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and . . . are more easily comprehended, and are more durable"; and, lastly, because in it "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."

This theory of poetry, distinctively social, though limited in social scope, was directly due to Wordsworth's knowledge of the shepherd-farmers of Cumberland, who seemed to him at once to embody the highest human virtues, to have attained to the truest human happiness, and to link to flesh and blood what was essential in the hopes of the eighteenth century. The character and condition of men familiar to him from his youth thus became not only the bridge over which Wordsworth passed from the unconscious democracy of his boyhood to the philosophic humanity of his later years, but one of the paths connecting the social ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Wordsworth's philosophy of life, or perhaps more accurately his idea of the right conditions of living, was a no less vital part of his thought because never systematically propounded by him. Speaking in 1814 of his "determination to compose a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society," he said that he did not intend "formally to announce a system," but that, if he should "succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader" would "have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself."<sup>1</sup> In this statement of his poetic method, implying as it did his whole theory of the social function of poetry, Wordsworth was, consciously or unconsciously, describing his own habit of thought. For him "system" remained ever implicit in fact; he apprehended it, not as a thing in itself but as it existed in and through the particular and concrete, and as it appealed primarily to the emotions. Yet the body of principles in which his experience was epitomized formed an integral part of that experience. He was one of the poets, who, if they are to exercise their gift, must rest in the conception of a coherent universe; in his exigent demand for a philosophy that should justify life, he was spiritually akin to Dante and Milton and Pope. Living in one of those great ages of transition when the landmarks of the past have been swept away,

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *The Excursion*, 1814.

he was at first bewildered by the loss of the habits and standards dear to the home-staying soul; but with the passion for order that marked his thought, he turned almost immediately to map out the strange regions in which he found himself. His clue to the understanding of the mystery was very different from that of his great predecessors; it lay not in the revealed will of a Deity, explicable, however absolute, not in a mysteriously harmonious universe of which human life was the center, but in the "Mind of Man," the "haunt and the main region" of his song.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's poetry, thus resting on what Mr. Hutchinson has aptly called a "psychography,"<sup>2</sup> necessarily lacks the clearness of such cosmogonies as those of Dante and Milton. His definition of the ultimate truths of existence, not through revelation or a rational theology, but through the vision vouchsafed in their best and happiest moments to minds living in accord with the primal laws of being; his persistent humanity, which gives his thought something of the elusiveness and variability of life itself, would in any case have made his teachings suggestive rather than formally complete. But Wordsworth was not only a mystic and a realist; he was one of an advance guard of thinkers. And so it was inevitable that to the defects of his mental qualities there should be added the weakness due to his position: the over-emphasis of what was peculiar in his beliefs, the failure to recognize truths superficially opposed to his ideas, the narrowness of thought that marked his partial isolation in his age. But it was, after all, the very magnitude of his task that entailed this measure of failure. No man could be among the first to rescue from ruin some part of the revolutionary purpose without bearing many a scar of the struggle through which he had to pass and many a sign of the isolation and loneliness in which he wrought. And whatever was lacking in Wordsworth's philosophy, it was yet vital and prophetic; it voiced thoughts, still inchoate or lying in the borderland of men's consciousness, that were to move the next century; it

<sup>1</sup> *The Recluse*, I, I, 793-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. 1898, Introd., XLV.

was rich in the wisdom which he, though fallen on evil days, had won in the hard-fought battle for the restoration of his faith in human happiness.

The sources and the development of his social beliefs Wordsworth presents with admirable fidelity in *The Prelude*, which he originally planned to serve as the introduction to his monumental poem, *The Recluse*, — as a sort of ante-chapel, he explains, that should lead into the main body of the great Gothic church in which he embodied his philosophy.<sup>1</sup> It is characteristic of him that in this story of "the origin and progress of his own powers" books have the smallest place. The themes with which he chiefly dealt, familiar, even commonplace, to the readers of the late eighteenth century, are all to be traced to evident literary sources: the love of nature and the sense of the relation of nature to human life, in which he found the clue to a new ideal for society, had been the staple of English poetry from Thomson to Burns; the conviction of spiritual reality on which his democratic faith ultimately rested gave but another expression to the sense of things unseen that had inspired the religious poetry of Cowper or the uncompromising mysticism of Blake; the very corner-stone of his creed, his insistence on the inherent right of life as such to opportunity and happiness, though the direct outcome of Revolutionary thought, was intimately related to the belief of Pope and Shaftesbury that humanity holds the central place in the universe; his demand for a return to nature, to a simple life of emotion, as the fundamental condition of a true social order, echoed, for all its English concreteness, the resounding generalities of Rousseau. But Wordsworth, though he held these ideas in common with his contemporaries, would seem to have come to them far less through reading than through a direct emotional and imaginative experiencing of them; to have perceived their meaning only when he had rediscovered for himself, and at first hand, what must long have been verbally familiar to him in literature. There can be no doubt that books in

<sup>1</sup> "Advertisement" to *The Prelude*, 1850.

one way and another played a large part in his development: his comments on his own reading show a wide and sympathetic acquaintance with English writers; he knew, says Christopher Wordsworth in the *Memoirs*, "a great deal of English poetry by heart,"<sup>1</sup> and his references to the poets prove his appreciation of them,—

"From Homer the great Thunderer . . .  
 Down to the low and wren-like warblings, made  
 For cottagers and spinners at the wheel,  
 And sun-burnt travellers resting their tired limbs,  
 Stretched under wayside hedge-rows."<sup>2</sup>

But, though generous in his recognition of the debt he owed to books, Wordsworth always considered them as secondary in influence to nature, God's "pure Word by miracle revealed," or to that understanding of the human heart which was the chief source of intellectual strength.

To his early life with nature Wordsworth traced the beginning of that love of humanity which was the enduring foundation of his later philosophy. The intensity of his delight in the beauty of natural objects was singular even among the poets of his generation; he could not, he says later, describe the "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" of his youthful days, when

"The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, nor any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye."<sup>3</sup>

From this pure aestheticism he emerged as he came to associate human life with the scenes of nature which had long tyrannized over his senses and his imagination. The process was,

<sup>1</sup> Vol. I, ch. v.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prelude*, v, 202-10.

<sup>3</sup> *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, 76-83.

however, of the most gradual. The shepherd passing from hill to hill through the smoking dews of morning, or

“glorified  
By the deep radiance of the setting sun.”<sup>1</sup>

first appeared to the beauty-haunted young poet less as a fellow man than as a solitary and sublime object forming a part of the landscape and taking on something of its quality. It was only as he was brought to closer quarters with reality and found his early facile faith in humanity shattered by humanity itself, that Wordsworth came to understand the moral and social significance of the lives of the Cumberland shepherds. Yet slow as he was in coming to this understanding, it was to these humble countrymen of his that he owed his abiding confidence in the essential goodness of mankind, and in the power of the lowly to attain to happiness through daily toil, simple living and acceptance of their allotted portion. This conception of character and society, essentially democratic even in its imaginative idealism, was the determining element in all his later thought. It was, too, strengthened and enriched by the experiences of his later youth. In Cambridge, though he judged the years spent there to have been on the whole profitless enough, the young mountaineer felt himself at home in an academic equality, in which the students

“were brothers all  
In honour, as in one community,  
Scholars and gentlemen.”<sup>2</sup>

In London, where for some months after he had taken his degree he lived with all his “young affections out of doors,”<sup>3</sup> the individual instances

“Of courage, or integrity, or truth,  
Or tenderness,”<sup>4</sup>

in which he especially delighted, were heightened in interest by the tawdry pomps, the idle shows, the tragic vice surrounding them.

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, VIII, 269-70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 227-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 600-1.

With this intensification of his human sympathy a sense of the mystery and vastness of the city's life constantly recurred. A premonition of this sense visited him as he for the first time drew near London.

"A weight of ages did at once descend  
Upon my heart; no thought embodied, no  
Distinct remembrances, but weight and power, —  
Power growing under weight."<sup>1</sup>

He had glimpses at least of the leveling humanity that moulded all its diverse activities into a mystic unity; of the common spirit moving the multitude, which had already been recognized by Rousseau as the "general will," and by Burke as a vital force pervading and uniting society. As he sums up the effect of the city upon his spiritual growth, he declares that here one sees,

"more than elsewhere  
Is possible, the unity of man,  
One spirit over ignorance and vice  
Predominant in good and evil hearts;  
One sense for moral judgments, as one eye  
For the sun's light."<sup>2</sup>

The idealism of Wordsworth's youthful conception of life largely accounts for his early indifference to the French Revolution. It is at first glance singular that one so truly democratic in spirit should have been almost untouched by revolutionary theories as set forth in the books and pamphlets of the day. But in fact the young dreamer could see little that was new in the ideas and aims of the Revolution, which he of necessity interpreted in the light of his early experience. His indifference was, too, of short duration. Whether drawn by curiosity or by a desire for travel which was one of his master-passions, he went to France in the autumn of 1791, and, living for the greater part of a year in the garrison town of Blois, came gradually to understand through the talk of the officers something of the principles at stake in the Revolution. Once aware of the actual condition of France, Wordsworth became the most ardent of

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, VIII, 552-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 667-72.

revolutionists, and, ready as he always was to prove his faith by his works, determined in the autumn of 1792 to throw in his lot with the Girondists. Yet even while glorying in the "benevolent spirit"<sup>1</sup> then abroad he seems to have been little influenced by abstract arguments in behalf of the rights of men, urged though they were with all the weight of friendship by the patriot Beaupuy, and to have realized to the full the loss sure to follow a violent break with the customs and traditions of the past. The one irrefragable plea for the Revolution was the abject poverty and the moral degradation which he believed it would banish forever from the world: it was the hunger-bitten shepherd girl, the symbol of the general misery of France, who finally convinced him of its righteousness. And his espousal of the cause of liberty was the more fervent, because as he came to see the evils under which France suffered, he passed from the dream which was to color all his later thought with its imaginative beauty, to knowledge of the real world,

" . . . the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us, — the place where, in the end,  
We find our happiness, or not at all!"<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth's sense of the human significance and practical necessity of the French Revolution united with his confidence that its principles were deep-rooted in the nature of things to make the wreck of his belief in it the one great catastrophe of his life. Balked in his desire to aid the Great Cause by his guardian's refusal to send him money, and already troubled by the ominous violence of the revolutionists themselves, his mood was such that the war of aggression begun by France in 1792 and England's alliance with Russia and Austria struck a double blow at his faith. The intensity of his suffering for this general woe cannot be overestimated; he was thrown from his habitual course, torn up by the roots from his natural habitat; the world in which he lived seemed to have fallen to pieces about him. Yet though overwhelmed, he was not annihilated;

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, ix, 519.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xi, 142-4.

the vigor of mind and temperament which had been so conspicuous in his earlier experience forbade him to accept, like the majority of his contemporaries, despair or apathy as his portion, and, his native belief in the goodness of man having been discredited by the stern logic of events, he sought for still deeper foundations on which he might safely build. In his perplexity he first turned to the theories of the extreme radicals, of whom Godwin was the leader and the type. This attempt to reëstablish his faith in a losing cause, though not without significance in his spiritual development, was doomed to failure by the very nature of his mind. "Turned aside from Nature's way," deprived of that air of concrete fact which was the very breath of his intellectual life, he dissected his world into nothingness, till finally, in what was to him the completest of bankruptcies, he lost all feeling of conviction and "yielded up moral questions in despair."<sup>1</sup> Nor, he tells us, did this unnatural passion for analysis leave untouched the world of outward beauty.

"Even the visible Universe  
 . . . . . with microscopic view  
 Was scanned."<sup>2</sup>

and like the moral world was dissolved into its elements and ceased to nourish his imaginative life. His restoration to spiritual health came, as he delights to point out, not through the head but through the heart, through the affectionate ministrations of his sister and a renewed sensitiveness to the beauty of nature. Of the tragedy involved in this restoration he seems to have had no inkling. He had, in fact, divorced himself so completely from the world of thought, had thrown himself so whole-heartedly into the rediscovered life of intuition and imagination, that he gloried in his weakness as well as in his strength, rejoicing hardly more in his renewed powers as a poet than in his abjuration of a main source of future growth. But

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, xi, 305.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xii, 89-92.

his unconsciousness of loss did not save him from the penalty that must be paid by all who renounce any part of their intellectual heritage, the narrowing of interest, that inevitably follows a one-sided moral and imaginative activity, is increasingly evident in the poetry of his later years, where his earlier spirituality declined to orthodoxy and his faith in mankind was staled into a commonplace conservatism.

The inconsistencies and contradictions into which he consequently fell did much to obscure the fundamental humanity of Wordsworth's philosophy; yet in spite of them, there can be no doubt that the serene joy, the tranquil assurance, the firm purpose of the years of his greatness as a poet were due to the reconquest of his faith in the possibility of men's earthly good and happiness. The crucial fact in his history was, indeed, the conviction that he had solved the riddle of life not only for himself, but for his fellow-men. His misdirected endeavor to reëstablish his lost position through a process of abstract reasoning had, in spite of the warp it gave his judgments and his habit of thought, done him good service by showing him the unsoundness of any scheme of reform that does not rest on the full acceptance of human nature as it is. Fortunately for him, in his hour of supreme trial he found, in memories whose meaning he then first came to see, a warrant that the hope which for a time seemed to have betrayed him, was based on the essential nature and ordinary experience of men. A crisis like that through which he had passed could be met by him only through the recognition of a reality deeper and more enduring than that which had been destroyed; and this reality he found in the lives of the shepherd farmers of Westmoreland and Cumberland. These northern peasants, long little more significant than features of the landscape, became to him when once seen as real inhabitants of a real world, the prophecy of that gracious existence for which all men everywhere might legitimately hope; they restored that faith in the life of man on earth, which was a necessity of his being. Of the foundation of his social creed he might truly say: —

"Yes the realities of life so cold,  
So cowardly, so ready to betray,  
So stinted in the measure of their grace  
As we pronounce them, doing them much wrong,  
Have been to me more bountiful than hope,  
Less timid than desire."<sup>1</sup>

The fervency of Wordsworth's advocacy of a peasant-democracy appears most plainly in the poetry of his early maturity. Simple and rustic life gave the subject-matter of about two-thirds of the poems published in the *Lyrical Ballads*, defined his point of view in almost all of those written before 1812, and inspired the theory of poetry which he set forth at length in 1800. But his promulgation of a specifically peasant gospel was as brief as ardent; with the passing of his first propagandist zeal the Simon Lees and Peter Bells and Betty Foys became less and less conspicuous in his writing. The shepherd farmers of his native country had, in fact, done their work for him when they had proved to his satisfaction that a coherent and happy society is attainable here and now; and his conceptions once adjusted in accordance with this belief, the poet henceforth concerned himself chiefly with that "general soul of man" which from the beginning had been the center of his interest. But though his preoccupation with the rustic was short, the type of character which he continued to offer to his age as the means of escape from its materialism, spiritual lethargy, and despair never lost the essential traits of the conditions in which it had been first discovered; in spite of many changes of garb, it remained

"The ancient rural character, composed  
Of simple manners, feelings unsupprest  
And undisguised, and strong and serious thought."<sup>2</sup>

It was, too, thoroughly democratic in that it proposed as the end of human endeavor virtues attainable by the many

"repining not to tread  
The little sinuous path of earthly care";<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Recluse*, I, 1, 65-70.

<sup>2</sup> *The Excursion*, V, 117-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 304-5.

it was primarily moral; its power was fed by constant springs of elemental feeling, by the love and fidelity, the wonder and awe with which simple natures respond to the call of the universe and to the demands of daily duty; and it preserved, by freedom from base and overstimulating excitements, its original sensitiveness to the beauties of human and natural life. It was the character of the potential poet, neither articulate nor conscious of itself, to whom the man gifted with genius may reveal the mysteries of their common being. In it the purely intellectual qualities were secondary and unobtrusive; the free play of perception and emotion and an orderly and beneficent activity, made up the whole duty of man; knowledge and power of thought, however necessary to the social economy or to the happiness of the few called to be scientists or philosophers, were not conditions of universal self-realization and hence formed no part of our inalienable human heritage. Such an ideal of character, limited in scope but possible of universal attainment, exemplified Wordsworth's belief that the elements of the highest as of the deepest experience are those basic feelings and obligations in which all men are equal. It boasted no excellences hidden from common understanding, no virtues

"Hard to be won, and only by a few."

But it was rich in those elementary experiences that nourish life; it accepted, and gloried in accepting, the common lot. It magnified the essentially human, while relegating to a secondary place those qualities that had hitherto been accepted as synonymous with greatness. It was the incarnation in flesh and blood of the long-professed faith:—

" The primal duties shine aloft — like stars;  
The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless,  
Are scattered at the feet of Man — like flowers.

Here is no boon  
For high — yet not for low; for proudly graced —  
Yet not for meek of heart.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Excursion*, ix. 235.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-45.

But though Wordsworth was occupied with humble life because of its universal value rather than because of its class-peculiarities, he often emphasized, in treating it, details irrelevant to his main purpose, sometimes in order to point a moral or expound a theory, and sometimes, it would seem, from pure joy in his new field of observation. These occasional intrusions of the outer and accidental into a delineation essentially typical and spiritual — the pins and tape in the wanderer's pack to which Coleridge objected — have been a veritable stumbling-stone to Wordsworth's critics, their very incongruity bringing them into undue prominence and seeming to justify the assumptions that Wordsworth had set out to paint a realistic picture, and that he had failed to do what he had undertaken.

The case against Wordsworth as a "stickit realist" is strongly put by M. Cestre, who finds the poet's failure in the portrayal of human character the more significant because of its contrast with his treatment of external nature. In describing out-of-door scenes, says the distinguished critic, Wordsworth shows a realism more delicate and more varied than that of Crabbe, richer and more flexible than that of Cowper — a realism that through the fullness of its detail, the softness of its outlines, the striking unity of its whole, places him among the greatest artists. But when Wordsworth turns from nature to picture human life he follows, according to M. Cestre, a far different method, giving us, instead of real people, strange compounds, made up of concrete elements borrowed from the everyday world and moral traits drawn from his own philosophic conceptions.<sup>1</sup>

There is truth in this analysis of Wordsworth's treatment of character, but it is a truth that takes small account of the poet's purpose and habitual procedure. For Wordsworth, interested not in characters but in character, was concerned with the likenesses rather than with the differences of men, and so turned inevitably from their dividing outer lineaments to the

<sup>1</sup> *La Revolution Française et Les Poètes Anglais*, ed. 1906, p. 532.

informing spirit that united them. With all the vigor and clarity of his perception, he was thus never a realist in the ordinary sense; even in description of natural beauty the accuracy ascribed to him is rather an imaginative penetration which sees the object illumined, so to speak, in the light of its own idea. He has what Mr. Caird calls "a poetic exactness of mind," a power of vision so simple and direct that it lends to his "treatment of the most subtle and evanescent of spiritual influences, something of the precision of a scientific definition."<sup>1</sup> His own account of his writing of the *Lyrical Ballads*, with its emphasis on his resolution to choose subjects from real life and then to throw over them the coloring of the imagination, does scant justice either to his conception of the workings of the poet's mind or to his own power as a poet. He was in fact, in spite of his many pedestrian passages, compact of imagination, and only in prosaic moments pieced together ideas and images in the fashion that, in the inadequate nomenclature of a new theory, he elsewhere classified as "fanciful." And the object that he saw as a whole, he saw always as related to or expressing the spiritual. The quality shown alike in his portrayals of character and of nature was an idealism that lived in and through the object, an idealism that gives his greatest poetry the very sublimity of poetic diction and expression that he abjures. Reality, so called, was to him the plastic material through which the idea was revealed; and when, after his wanderings through a barren desert of speculation, he turned back to his early experience, he rejoiced in it not only, or even chiefly, as fact, but as the embodiment of spiritual forces, and so as the assurance that the hope for which he had lived was still possible of realization. His restoration to actuality was thus literally a restoration to the ideal. It had been through contact with facts, with facts devoid of inspiration and ideality, that he had first begun to doubt; through barren speculation divorced from facts that he had fallen into despair; and his recovery from this despair was possible only when he came to

<sup>1</sup> "Wordsworth," *Essays on Literature and Philosophy*, ed. 1892, vol. I.

see "the dear green earth"<sup>1</sup> to which his heart was bound as the home of his far-reaching hopes; to recognize the "present good in life's familiar face"<sup>2</sup> as earnest of a greater good to which men may attain.

The embodiment of an ideal in the actual inevitably entails certain penalties. In Wordsworth's case the price paid was the final limitation of his social program to intellectual and social mediocrity. It was part of his poetic arrogance to think none too highly of the reasoning faculties; part of his revolt against the intellectualism of the eighteenth century to insist on the value of the elementary and primitive virtues. These less worthy elements of egoism and reaction, mingling with his nobler enthusiasm for reality, prevented his growth through the years to a richer view of life; the morning promise of his thought was to a great extent belied by the long half-century during which he applied to all sorts of practical problems doctrines formulated before he was thirty, or echoed in poetry that, great as it was, became increasingly sterile, the ideas that had illumined his youth.

Even the character on which his philosophy rested had its share in limiting his thought; it presented, not the whole truth for which he had striven, but that fraction of it which he had won hardly and against tremendous odds of circumstance in the disintegration of his earlier creed; though it brought his ideal democracy home to earth, it robbed his humanity of many a hope. Like every truly popular movement, Wordsworth's democracy remorselessly sacrificed the good of the few to the salvation of the many. But it went further than the enunciation of its peculiar truth: not content to declare the wisdom of men to be foolishness, it set their wisdom and their humanity in an opposition apparently irreconcilable. The loss involved in the acceptance of such a doctrine was, to the immediate and superficial view, overwhelming; its gain, dimly perceptible to the eye of faith, lay at the end of a long period of toil and culture.

W.H. Bentham

<sup>1</sup> *Peter Bell*, Prologue, 51.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prelude*, XIII, 62.

Bernard Bosanquet, speaking of the present moral and intellectual state of Europe, says that we are to-day standing at the beginning of an era parallel to the so-called Dark Ages.<sup>1</sup> In the Dark Ages of the past some at least of the vital truths presented by Christianity were appropriated by the rank and file of the people, and were incorporated, though slowly, into the universal spiritual experience; in the Dark Ages through which we are now passing the larger culture of the few is becoming the possession of the many; the belief in the right of all to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is passing over from theory into practice, from an inspiring trust in human possibility to an unceasing effort to justify that trust. Wordsworth was among the seers who brought this modern religion of humanity home to the thought and affections of the last century. He passed from the old order to the new through the realization that the happiness of mankind was even more directly the result of character and conduct than of knowledge or power, and that the conditions necessary for the development of right character and conduct could be, and should be, brought within the reach of every member of the race. Much that he considered non-essential we to-day believe to be the common birthright of men; much that he taught he held in common with more radical and more intellectually courageous thinkers; but neither his own weakness nor the strength of others can materially lessen the importance of the appeal to experience, by which, in the day of its eclipse, he vindicated the fundamental truth of the ideal of democracy. For the time being, humanity, if personated at all, appeared in the garb of the rustic; the life of the town became less significant than the life of the countryside; the world of logic was forgotten in enthusiasm for the worlds of spiritual insight and of beauty. The actual life of the peasant was thus the starting-point for the development of one phase of the democracy of the new century. The yeoman, or "statesman," of northern

<sup>1</sup> "From Paganism to Christianity," *The Civilization of Christendom and Other Studies*, ed. 1899, pp. 55-8.

England took the place that had been occupied a few years earlier by the noble savage or the disembodied citizen of the world, offering like them an ideal of character and condition toward which society must move. Men's minds could ultimately rest in him no more than in his predecessors; but he at least lived nearer their ordinary experiences, and so marked a long step towards the realization of the claim for the many that had hitherto seemed little more than a Utopian dream.

Wordsworth's social conceptions, simple and vital as they were, lay beyond the perception, well-nigh beyond the imagination, of his own time. There is, indeed, no better measure of his originality than the failure of contemporary critics to appreciate the social meaning of his poetry. Crabbe's remorseless pictures of the village had been welcomed for their fidelity to nature by the readers of news-sheet and novel; Burns's songs of the Scottish peasantry had been hailed by the lovers of folk-poetry, eighteenth century enthusiasts for the primitive. But Wordsworth's philosophy of humble life was hardly guessed at, even by the smaller public who appreciated the ballad-like simplicity of the new poetry or its exquisite truth to nature.

The reviews of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which of course bore the brunt of the critical onset, fully justify the contention of Coleridge that a great and original poet must create his audience as well as his poem, must himself develop in his readers a genuine appreciation of the new world he opens to them.<sup>1</sup> Admiring or condemnatory, they alike concerned themselves with the more superficial qualities of the poems, and even when their praise was sincere were singularly inconsistent and inconclusive in their argument. The *Critical Review* first took the field with an article then and now commonly attributed to Southey. The writer, whoever he was, showed himself strangely wanting in discrimination, his approval of some of the poems being offset by his familiar description of *The Ancient Mariner* as "a Dutch attempt at German sublimity,"<sup>2</sup> and his declaration that the

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, note, ch. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Lamb, in a letter to Southey, November 8, 1798, said: "If you wrote that

"experiment" tried in the book had failed, not because the language of conversation is unfit for poetry, but because it has here "been tried upon uninteresting subjects." A more discerning critic in Griffith's *Monthly Review* in June, 1799, treated the individual poems sympathetically, yet concluded that it would be a loss to poetry to return to these simple subjects and numbers, since "none but savages have submitted to eat acorns after corn was found"; and a contributor to the *British Critic* in October, 1799, remarkably courageous in his admiration, almost ignored the subject-matter of the book, and based his favorable judgment chiefly on its style, declaring that "the simplicity even of the most unadorned tale in this volume" was superior "to all the meretricious frippery of the Darwinian taste."

A new era of criticism began, as Coleridge pointed out in the *Biographia Literaria*, when Wordsworth set forth his theories of poetry in the Preface of 1800, the reviewers being apparently aroused by Wordsworth's explanation of his purpose to a formal condemnation of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Their common point of view is clearly stated by Jeffrey, the most influential as well as the ablest of them all. It is the first article of Jeffrey's literary creed that the standards of poetry were "fixed long ago by certain inspired writers whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question," and that they included among other things verbal conformity to the usages of good society and a general observance of the laws of good sense. Uniformity of vocabulary and point of view in poetry, whatever might be the subject-matter, followed inevitably upon the acceptance of such a creed. "In serious poetry," says Jeffrey, with a lucidity that allows of no misunderstanding, "a man of the middling or lower order *must necessarily* lay aside a great deal of his ordinary language; he *must* avoid errors in grammar and

review in the *Critical Review*, I am sorry you are so sparing of praise to the *Ancient Mariner*. So far from calling it as you do . . . a 'Dutch Attempt,' etc., I call it a right English attempt, and a successful one, to dethrone German sublimity."

*not to be  
at cause of  
convention*

orthography; and steer clear of the cant of particular professions. . . . After all this, it may not be very easy to say how we are to find him out to be a low man, or what marks can remain of the ordinary language of conversation in the inferior orders of society.”<sup>1</sup> The “low-bred hero” has, indeed, with this reform of his language, undergone a sea-change, becoming, under whatever name, the writer or man of the world. The finer spirit of the new poetry was inevitably misjudged by a reader so temperamentally antipathetic to it. Of Wordsworth’s ideas in particular, whether on poetry or society, the critics of this school had scarcely an inkling; and judging the character to which he introduced them by their established canons, they speedily dismissed it as a vulgar intruder into the world of imagination or reduced it to the shadow of a merely ideal existence.

Radical social thinkers were hardly more generous in their recognition of Wordsworth’s prescient thought than were the defenders of convention and tradition. For their failure to understand that he was with them in their war for humanity there were many reasons. The independence of character and life that isolated him from the more superficial intellectual currents of the time did something to alienate their sympathy from his ideas. The increasing political conservatism of his later years brought to the merely casual observer the strongest of indictments against the sincerity of his earlier democracy; the high courage of the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* was forgotten in his opposition to Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill of 1832; the disinterested enthusiasm that inspired him to throw in his lot with the revolutionists, in the timid conformity of his laureateship.

The dissent and antagonism aroused in radical circles by Wordsworth’s political affiliations were especially evident in the poets of the next two generations, who, though they might accept Wordsworth as their master in his interpretation of nature and the spiritual life, could find no common ground be-

<sup>1</sup> Review of Southey’s *Thalaba*, *Edinburgh Review*, October, 1802.

tween his ideas on social matters and their own opinion; who saw — and were compelled to see — in his increasing conservatism, only the renunciation of his earlier faith, the betrayal of the cause of humanity, the treason of the leader lost to mankind. Yet, if they could not feel that Wordsworth was "with them," neither could they wholly forget the courage and humanity that linked his thought to theirs. The perplexity and coldness that marked their attitude are evident in Mrs. Shelley's vindication of her husband against the charge of attacking Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third* although she protests that "this poem was written as a warning — not as a narration of the reality."<sup>1</sup> The sense of desertion and the grief of heart felt by these poets finds its most poignant expression in Shelley's sonnet *To Wordsworth*: —

"One loss is mine,  
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore;  
Thou wert as a lone star whose light did shine  
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar;  
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood  
Above the blind and battling multitude:  
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave  
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, —  
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be."

But even had the ardent radicals who followed him not been repelled by the facts of Wordsworth's later history, it is doubtful whether they could have discerned the likeness that existed between their ideals and his. The intension of his philosophy was, in logical phrase, far greater than theirs; but his demands, whether for the happiness or for the opportunity of men, must in the nature of things have seemed contemptibly prosaic and earth-bound to those seers of visions and dreamers of dreams.

While Wordsworth's social teachings were for different reasons minimized alike by conventional and radical critics, they were only partially appreciated even by such a friend as Coleridge. Discussing Wordsworth's poetry in the *Biographia*

<sup>1</sup> Note by Mrs. Shelley on *Peter Bell the Third*, *Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, 1904, p. 402.

*Literaria*, he says that Wordsworth both misrepresented his principles and injured his cause when he claimed that the experience of the peasant or rustic was the essential subject-matter of his poetry. The friends were at one in their belief that poetry is in its nature ideal and philosophic and that its subject is human character and human life rather than the accidental experience of an individual. But their conception of the essentially human elements of character differed widely, Coleridge finding in the philosopher what Wordsworth regarded as characteristic of the rustic. Wordsworth, according to Coleridge, thus mistook the true character of poetry in seeking poetic language among peasants, the vocabulary of the poet being essentially that of the thinker. "The thoughts, feelings, language, and manners of the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland," which Wordsworth makes the true subjects of poetry, says Coleridge, "as far as they are actually adopted in those poems, may be accounted for from causes, which will and do produce the same results in every state of life, whether in town or country." These causes he names as "that independence, which raises a man above servitude, or daily toil for the profit of others, yet not above the necessity of industry and a frugal simplicity of domestic life; and the accompanying unambitious, but solid and religious, education, which has rendered few books familiar, but the Bible, and the Liturgy or Hymn-Book."<sup>1</sup>

The passage might read as a transcript from Wordsworth; yet the conclusions to be drawn from it by the two, were, in emphasis at least, very different. For Coleridge, with his characteristic love of the abstract and general, passes beyond the object to the idea behind it, and declares that what is peculiar to the new teaching is non-essential and misleading: that the rustic's language, purified and reconstructed as it must be, "will not differ from the language of any other man of common sense"; that the influence of nature is nothing unless the trained mind coöperate with it; and that "the best part of

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ch. xvii.

human language" is derived, not "from observation of the outer world, but from reflection on the acts of the mind itself."<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, on the other hand, insists that the essential qualities of moral and poetic greatness are to be found in the simple life of the country; that the man of sense in so far as he is genuine in his humanity uses the unsophisticated language of the rustic; and that these universally shared feelings make up the best part of the best men's lives. There is a truth in Coleridge not found in Wordsworth; but by passing too lightly over the object on which Wordsworth's attention was centered, the greater critic lost something of the thought of the poet who found in the life of the peasant the norm to which the highest experience must approximate.

Of late years criticism, more historical and psychological in method than ever before, has especially emphasized the relation of Wordsworth's poetry to the social cataclysm which shaped its character. The result has been an abundant vindication of its importance in that work of moral reconstruction with which the poet was so deeply concerned. Agreeing as to the ultimate value of Wordsworth's philosophy, these later critics yet differ widely in their judgment of his grasp of social principles, and of the degree, and even the nature, of his influence. According to such a Wordsworthian as M. Legouis, the poet had, in his later years, no direct connection with the practical activities of his time and affected it wholly by promulgating an ideal of individual character that made for the general good. M. Legouis insists that Wordsworth, after his brief period of enthusiasm for liberty, withdrew from the world of action to a life beautiful in simplicity, self-control, and nearness to nature; and that after he had seen the revolutionary dreams of his youth expelled from the domain of politics, he found a tranquil refuge in natural surroundings and in poetry and poetic theory.<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth's optimism, according to this critic, sprang from the vitality of his own

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ch. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *La Jeunesse de Wordsworth*, ed. 1896, p. 449.

joyous spirit,<sup>1</sup> from a singular capacity for happiness, rather than from any intelligent apprehension of the forces operating around him; and his work, great as it was, was therefore limited to the divination of those spiritual influences that, in the wreck of a large social hope, were shaping out new possibilities of individual happiness.

There is no gainsaying the positive truth in this judgment: the basic fact in Wordsworth's poetry is his presentation of a type of character true to the conditions of the new democracy, and offering as the goal of endeavor virtues complementary to those demanded by the thinkers of the eighteenth century, and for the time at least destructive of them. But in spite of Wordsworth's renunciation of a brief enthusiasm for reason, misapplied, as he thought, to moral and social questions; in spite of his recantation of what seemed to him insubstantial schemes for man's happiness, his poetry yet contained in itself the ideas that had moved the philosophers of the Revolution. This aspect of his work is the one dwelt upon by Professor Dowden, who, recognizing to the full that Wordsworth deals with character as the primary social unit, yet points out the persistence in his later philosophy of the ideas that had moved his ardent youth, and declares that, in spite of his reaction against most of its learning, he is allied with the progressive movement of the eighteenth century by his faith in the beneficence of nature, his desire to simplify life, his sense of the inherent dignity of man as man, and his confidence in that "high destiny for the human race" which is the inspiring idea of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

But close as was Wordsworth's relation to the eighteenth century, it was neither clear nor simple; he drew his ideas from his predecessors, but he transformed them in becoming their interpreter. It is on his peculiar office as mediator between two centuries and two social orders, that M. Cestre, one of the most penetrating of his critics, lays special stress. Wordsworth's work, he says, chiefly consisted in the transmutation of the

<sup>1</sup> *La Jeunesse de Wordsworth*, ed. 1896, p. 392.

<sup>2</sup> *The French Revolution and English Literature*, ed. 1897, p. 206-8.

ideas of the eighteenth into the motives of the nineteenth century. The passionate desire for moral equality, social justice, and fraternal union which he had in great part drawn from the Revolutionists, he brought home to the heart and life of later generations by an imaginative and emotional transformation that for a time obscured their relationship with the past. The imaginative and emotional rendering of ideas is invariably accompanied by loss as well as by gain. It was, as M. Cestre recognizes, the weakness no less than the strength of the poet that his radicalism was a passion and a sentiment rather than a philosophy, and that the division between his feeling and his thought as to social matters set him, from first to last, at odds with himself. Yet this critic insists that the evils which came from this divided allegiance were far less than the good that resulted from the free play of his sentiment and imagination over ideas everywhere dwarfed by premature, self-interested, or unintelligent attempts to put them into practice; that his romantic radicalism made possible a deeper conception of society than that of either the conservative nobility absorbed in itself, or the middle-class liberals who, in the name of humanity, were working almost solely for their own advantage; and that the very separation of his ideas from the sphere of practice, although it limited their immediate effectiveness, increased their power to further that emotional reconstruction, that linking of past and present, which was the condition of future progress.<sup>1</sup>

Such a recognition of the essentially social nature of Wordsworth's poetry became possible only when critics had themselves attained to a point of view something like that of the poet, when the order of ideas that he presented had become the common property of the thinking world. But Wordsworth was himself from the first keenly aware, both of the social value of the type of character that he presented and of its absolute dependence on conditions essentially like those in which it had been developed. The life of the peasant-shepherd offered him

<sup>1</sup> *La Revolution Française et les Poètes Anglais*, ed. 1906, p. 554-6.

the goal toward which modern civilization must move. With the physical, economic, and moral surroundings of the shepherd-farmers of Cumberland he was constantly preoccupied. His poems and letters are full of references to their habits and conditions. They are, he says, writing to Fox in 1801, "small independent *proprietors* of land, here called statesmen, men of respectable education, who daily labour on their own little properties. . . . Their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written, which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances, when they would otherwise be forgotten. It is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man, from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn."<sup>1</sup> The hardships in the lives of these men were inevitable; storm and solitude, exposure and care, were their natural lot. But toils and trials seemed to Wordsworth among the conditions of human happiness, so long as they were due to the nature of things and not to any injustice of mankind, and so long as industrial and moral independence, the centering of affection and activity in his home, the possession of the little property that protected him from the utmost uncertainty and fear, made and kept the worker a man. The social and economic circumstances of the northern peasant, the common life of the little community in which he had seen all normal varieties of character and well-being, thus became for the poet the prototype of the later state, a state marked by slight differences in material possession, and giving to all its citizens the opportunity for that stern naturalness and morality of character which he judged to be the very cornerstone of happiness.

But the circumstances of the Westmoreland shepherd-farmer did more than give Wordsworth the ideal of the true state: they formed the standard by which he judged, often narrowly but always with some touch of deep wisdom, the changes going on in the England of the early nineteenth century. For though it still actually existed in a part of England,

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Charles James Fox, January 14, 1801.

the world that Wordsworth had known in his youth was even there threatened with the economic and moral disintegration everywhere following the introduction of machinery and the establishment of the modern industrial system. These great economic changes, whose outcome is still hidden from our eyes, affected him profoundly, and forced him constantly to apply to shifting social conditions those convictions as to the nature and life of man which he had formulated during the years following the French Revolution. It was characteristic of his faithful observation of the facts of the social as of the natural world that he was, from the first, aware of the tremendous powers for good and evil at work in the industrial civilization which during his lifetime was transforming England. "An inventive Age," he says,

"Has wrought, if not with speed of magic, yet  
To most strange issues." <sup>1</sup>

The Wanderer pictures the change which he has seen pass over the face of the country: —

"From the germ  
Of some poor hamlet, rapidly produced  
Here a huge town, continuous and compact,  
Hiding the face of earth for leagues — and there,  
Where not a habitation stood before,  
Abodes of men irregularly massed  
Like trees in forests, — spread through spacious tracts,  
O'er which the smoke of unremitting fires  
Hangs permanent, and plentiful as wreaths  
Of vapor glittering in the morning sun." <sup>2</sup>

He sees the barren wilderness "erased or disappearing," "the wide sea peopled" with the wonders of English merchandise; he rejoices in the martial power hence accruing to

"the blessed Isle,  
Truth's consecrated residence, the seat  
Impregnable of Liberty and Peace." <sup>3</sup>

This was the outer and glorious aspect of the new England, these were the transformations on which the material and sci-

<sup>1</sup> *The Excursion*, viii, 87-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-7.

entific hopes of the century were founded. But Wordsworth, rejoicing in his country's prosperity yet looking also on the darker side of the great change which it was undergoing, saw clearly "the baneful effects arising out of an ill-regulated and excessive application of powers so admirable in themselves,"<sup>1</sup> but so essentially inhuman in the hands of ignorance and greed; and, beholding in the new industrial conditions

"Such outrage done to nature as compels  
The indignant power to justify herself;  
Yea, to avenge her violated rights,  
For England's bane,"<sup>2</sup>

never ceased to insist on the rights of life itself in the vast increase of the machinery of living, or to declare the necessity of sympathetic and intelligent guidance if society were to maintain its stability against dangers that threatened its very existence.

Wordsworth was, of course, but one among the many who, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, saw the necessity of bringing order out of the chaos of English life. Efforts to remedy the crying industrial evils of the time were perhaps the most hopeful signs of the years in which he was ardently propounding his social creed. There were, from the very beginning of the century, constant attempts, slowly leading to some measure of success, to regulate the industry of factory-workers through legislation, to improve the education of the masses and to widen its scope, to reform the criminal code and the poor laws, to help both manufacturers and laborers by the extension and equalization of the suffrage. Theorists were as busy as practical reformers: Coleridge was suggesting a social philosophy based on an organic conception of society; Bentham, in the name of reason, was attacking existing abuses and demanding their immediate reform. The political economists, absorbed in explaining the conditions of a production identified with material prosperity, were fast coming to a sense of the moral issues involved in what had at first seemed purely economic questions. Owen's notable experiment in coöpera-

<sup>1</sup> Note on *The Excursion*, viii, 111-12. <sup>2</sup> *The Excursion*, viii, 153-6.

tive production in New Lanark in 1817 was the most conspicuous of several tentative efforts to apply to men's business relations conceptions more ethical and more democratic than the new-old declaration of the right of strength to its own. And perhaps more significant than any of these movements was the attainment by the workingmen of England, through unspeakable suffering and struggle in the first third of the century, of the right to form combinations of labor and freely to discuss their grievances.

It was with this growth of social consciousness and power among the workers themselves — though he might never have acknowledged the relation — that Wordsworth's work was most vitally connected. For he saw the goal toward which, however unconscious of their end, the toilers of England were moving; and it was certainly he who in those early years gave most adequate expression to their dimly felt sense that they must vindicate for the mass of men the "sacred claims" of human life. He believed, it is true, that their goal was to be reached only when no

"false conclusions of the reasoning power  
Made the eye blind, and closed the passages  
Through which the ear converses with the heart";<sup>1</sup>

and this deep-rooted distrust of reason and all its works often made his views on particular questions to the last degree reactionary. But in years of darkness he never lost sight of the main issue, the guarding and enriching of human life, whether that life was threatened by the collapse of a great hope or by the magnitude of its own control over nature. Among the poets he thus became the first of the spiritual seers of the new democracy, blazing the path which Shelley, Swinburne, Emerson, and Whitman were to follow further than he.

Wordsworth never wavered in his belief that the measure of national prosperity lay in the moral energy of its people; that the one test of a nation's wealth was its power to create and diffuse the greatest amount of happiness. Anticipating such

<sup>1</sup> *The Excursion*, iv, 1153-5.

later teachers as Carlyle and Ruskin and Morris in their insistence on a moral, industrial, and æsthetic rather than a political democracy, he was, even in his duller years, more buoyantly hopeful than they. There is still an echo of the large enthusiasm of the eighteenth century in his refusal to see anything that could prevent the fulfillment of the social hope of humanity where nature had not thrown an impassable barrier in the way. He not only trusted whole-heartedly in

"the worth  
And dignity of individual man,  
No composition of the brain, but man  
Of whom we read, the man whom we behold  
With our own eyes,"<sup>1</sup>

but was convinced that man could achieve his destiny in and through the ordinary circumstances of life. After the reestablishment of his lost faith, he inquired, he tells us, with greater though more subdued interest than before, whether the almost universal degradation of mankind was inevitable — that is, whether in the nature of things there lay any reason for the pitiful condition of the race. Describing the truly humane man, he asks, —

"Why is this glorious creature to be found  
One only in ten thousand? What one is,  
Why may not millions be? What bars are thrown  
By Nature in the way of such a hope?  
Our animal appetites and daily wants,  
Are these obstructions insurmountable?"<sup>2</sup>

Once started on this quest, he soon convinced himself that the evils under which the world was groaning lay not in "boon nature" herself, but in the conditions that man has made for man. By studying the lives of the poor, by inspecting "the basis of the social pile," he saw the "mental power and genuine virtue" on which true prosperity depends manifested among those who live

"By bodily toil, labour exceeding far  
Their due proportion, under all the weight  
Of that injustice which upon ourselves  
Ourselves entail."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, XIII, 80-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-100.

The nobility and heroism of the poor, the happiness existing where nature lends herself to the production of character and joy, were thus his warrant for believing that mankind as a whole might reach the full state of human perfection and enjoy the full measure of human happiness. Nor was he content to preach this as a far-off ideal; the "human kindnesses and simple joys" that flourished "among the natural abodes of man" threw into sharp relief the misery of the workingmen of England. In the light of this contrast, the vaunted industrial prosperity of his time revealed its lurking evils: the physical and moral degradation that followed long hours of work in unhealthful surroundings; the destruction of any true home-life where fathers were forced to idleness and mothers to unseasonable wage-earning; above all, the failure of the very sources of life, when little children, driven by that "premature necessity" which "preconsumes the reason," toiled in mine or mill until by excess of labor the very lineaments of humanity were effaced, until

"liberty of mind :  
Is gone for ever; and this organic frame,  
So joyful in its motions, is become  
Dull, to the joy of her own motions dead."<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth by no means limited himself to poetry in the expression of his social and political interests: from the time of his vigorous protest in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, there is hardly a subject of public concern on which he does not declare himself either in his letters or by some effort in behalf of his principles. He is reported as having said that "although he was known to the world only as a poet, he had given twelve hours' thought to the condition and prospects of society for one to poetry."<sup>2</sup> More than this, the strength and fervency of his social beliefs urged him to a practical activity that he considered at times detrimental to his work as a poet. Convinced as strongly as Godwin that the science of politics is in the

<sup>1</sup> *The Excursion*, VIII, 321-4.

<sup>2</sup> William Knight, *Life of Wordsworth*, ed. 1889, vol. III, p. 238.

last issue a moral science, he was indefatigable in his attempts to bring the social and political policies of England to the test of ethical principles. The story of his application of these principles to practical matters is, it is true, in some ways rather sorry reading. In spite of his underlying faith in humanity he utterly failed to recognize the greatness of the democratic movement of his day or the beneficent forces at work among the masses of the people; he is reported to have said, in 1833, that "he saw nothing but darkness, disorder, and misery in the immediate prospect"; and again, for all his trust in unspoiled human nature, he declared that he had "no confidence in the body of the people, in their willingness to read what is wholesome, or to do what is right."<sup>1</sup>

But though such inconsistencies separated him from much that was good in his time and led to many mistaken judgments, he yet rendered the cause of democracy an inestimable service by the constancy of his appeal to certain fundamental truths which, though out of favor for the moment, were essential to the future development of England. John Stuart Mill once said to a radical friend, "Wordsworth . . . is against you, no doubt, in the battle which you are now waging, but after you have won, the world will need more than ever those qualities which Wordsworth is keeping alive and nourishing."<sup>2</sup> But not only was it the glory of Wordsworth's poetry to nourish in an age overwhelmingly materialistic the moral and emotional qualities on which progress ultimately depends; in spite of his blindness to many of the nobler elements in contemporary thought, — his dogged application of ideas to practical matters, narrow as it often was, did much to show the inadequacy of the short cuts to reform which satisfied men bent on achieving personal success equally with social good, or hoping for permanent improvement in the conditions of mankind from partial material and political changes. If in some respects Wordsworth asked less than the liberal thinkers of his day, in others his demands

<sup>1</sup> William Knight, *Life of Wordsworth*, ed. 1889, vol. III, pp. 240-1.

<sup>2</sup> John Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, ed. 1898, vol. III, pp. 49-50.

went far beyond their dreams; if, for instance, he distrusted the power of school-training and the possession of the ballot to make the world a much better place to live in, he never ceased to insist that the mass of men, if they are to be truly good or happy, must enjoy an industrial and moral independence that could be attained only by the most thorough-going economic reforms.

The social radicalism existing under Wordsworth's superficial conservatism appeared very clearly in his ideas of democracy. In many passages he declared himself against what he considered the discredited doctrine of equality; yet while he thus renounced a cardinal democratic doctrine he went far beyond most radicals of his day in demanding for every man the right, not to a liberty, as he thought, against nature, but to the full development of his powers and hence to a moderate and moral happiness. This claim of the many to consideration and opportunity, which rested ultimately on his professed conviction of the dignity of human life as such, remained no merely academic or metaphysical principle, but was unremittingly applied to the consideration of practical problems. Nowhere does the logic with which he persistently urged it appear more strikingly than in his discussion of the Poor Laws. Basing his argument on the principle that every one is entitled to the full and happy exercise of his abilities, he declared it to be the duty of the state to provide for all its citizens, not only employment but the kind of employment that was suited to their individual needs and capacities. This declaration of a duty of government and of a right of its members which society is still far from admitting was accompanied, or balanced, by a very firm insistence on the limited wants and desires of the mass of men.

A good illustration of his point of view, non-sentimental yet extremely radical, is seen in his attitude toward the opportunities for recreation that should be open to the workingmen of England. These opportunities he would have closely associated with their daily life, affirming that workingmen, like

other human beings, can enter into their æsthetic heritage only by living in the midst of healthful, well-ordered, and beautiful surroundings; and that occasional and promiscuous pleasure-seeking, even in the face of the most picturesque scenes, can do nothing to strengthen their sense of beauty or to form their moral being. True to these principles, he actively opposed the building of the Kendal and Windermere railroad, by means of which it was proposed to open up the Lake Country to the inhabitants of Carlisle and Leeds. The promoters of the scheme urged in its behalf that it would enable the workingmen of those cities to share in all the ennobling influences of the most romantic scenery of England, and Wordsworth, in arguing against them, dwells hardly more on the injury to the natural beauty of the country and the injustice to its inhabitants of destroying this beauty, than on the absolute failure of occasional and hurried visits to the country to give the refined taste and the higher pleasure popularly supposed to result from intercourse with nature. In his main argument, he tried "to prove that the perception of what has acquired the name of picturesque and romantic scenery is so far from being intuitive, that it can be produced only by a slow and gradual process of culture; and to show, as a consequence, that the humbler ranks of society are not, and cannot be, in a state to gain material benefit from a more speedy access than they now have to this beautiful region."<sup>1</sup>

But though he would make no sacrifice to bestow on those not ready to profit by it a gift beyond their reach, Wordsworth contended that in their daily life the poor should find opportunity for the æsthetic development and satisfaction of which they were capable. In the love of nature as in all else, he recognized that use and wont are all but omnipotent, that ordinary men enjoy what they know well, or at least what is linked by every association to their material well-being and sense of happiness, — green fields, clear blue skies, running streams of pure water, rich groves and woods, orchards, and

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the *Morning Post*, Dec. 17, 1844.

all the ordinary varieties of rural nature. Familiarity with such scenes as these, by means of excursions cheap enough to be frequent, or, better, by the Sunday afternoon rambles of families through the fields surrounding their homes, could, he thought, alone profit the new generation of operatives. Demands like these in behalf of the working-people of England, whether for their steady and congenial employment, or for healthful and beautiful surroundings, far outran the democratic conceptions of Wordsworth's day; few of his contemporaries, however sincere their desire for reform, guessed that democracy, if it meant anything, meant the right of every man to opportunity for self-expression in the occupation through which he earned his daily bread, and to the ordered beauty in his environment that should develop his moral and æsthetic faculties.

In these discussions of social matters, a familiar doctrine is, by Wordsworth's application of it, brought to a conclusion more radical than could be accepted by his age. A similar change from an old order of thought to a new is evident in his theories of education, a subject on which he has first and last left many expressions of opinion. The determining element in these theories was the belief in a natural simplicity of living which he and his contemporaries owed to Rousseau; but that belief was itself deeply modified both by its interpretation through social conditions actually existing in the Cumberland mountains and by a faith in the essential goodness of men to which Rousseau, for all his reforming zeal, had only partially attained. The result was an entire change of emphasis on the importance for the child of what Wordsworth calls "tuition," or school instruction, the training of the school being as nothing when set over against the broader discipline of circumstances. Wordsworth himself had gained relatively so little from the foolishness of teaching, so much from the natural exercise of his own faculties, that it was easy for him to believe in the self-developing power of the mind and in the comparative worthlessness of any methodized intellec-

tual training. Taught by his own experience, he demanded as the first condition of education a large share of independence for the pupil and the free play of his emotions and imagination as well as of his intellect. Among the blessings of his own childhood he reckoned as second only to his unrestrained life with nature and his herding with "a race of real children,"<sup>1</sup> his freedom to wander, "in the season of unperilous choice,"<sup>2</sup> at his will among books; and scorn is mingled with his pity for the "model of a child"<sup>3</sup> who, ever forced to premature knowledge by

"Some intermeddler . . . on the watch  
To drive him back, and pound him, like a stray,  
Within the pinfold of his own conceit,"<sup>4</sup>

must purchase an untimely wisdom by the sacrifice of the mysterious powers of growth.<sup>5</sup> His opposition to the popular pedagogic systems of the day, by which children were kept in perpetual tutelage, found concrete expression in his dislike of children's books and of any prescription or oversight of their reading; in his claim that natural scenery surrounding the child and associated with his spontaneous activities and amusements was one of the great elements of culture; and in his demand for a training that would teach a few things well. In his letters and *obiter dicta* on educational matters the ideas incorporated in the story of his own childhood were repeated again and again. It was on them that he based, not only his condemnation of current ideals of teaching, but his conviction that a genuine and universal education would in great part remedy the social evils under which Europe was suffering. He had, indeed, no stronger belief than that any advance in civilization must be founded on a discipline that would rightly inform the minds of all classes; he declared that Europe needed a new and vital education far more than she needed new laws or new armies, and he steadfastly insisted on the duty of England

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, v, 408-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

to teach her people. In words more exact than poetic, he expressed his longings for

". . . the coming of that glorious time  
 When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth  
 And best protection, this imperial Realm,  
 While she exacts allegiance, shall admit  
 An obligation, on her part, to *teach*  
 Them who are born to serve her and obey;  
 Binding herself by statute to secure  
 For all the children whom her soil maintains  
 The rudiments of letters, and inform  
 The mind with moral and religious truth,  
 Both understood and practised, — so that none,  
 However destitute, be left to droop  
 By timely culture unsustained; or run  
 Into a wild disorder; or be forced  
 To drudge through a weary life without the help  
 Of intellectual implements and tools;  
 A savage horde among the civilised,  
 A servile band among the lordly free!"<sup>1</sup>

All Wordsworth's reflections on education were colored by his belief that it should prepare for life, and that, for the great majority, it must, however deeply and genuinely human, be limited by the necessities of the hand-worker. The test that he applied to any given education was, therefore, its power to create a character of a certain type, this type in turn justifying itself by its function in the larger social whole. Trying their results by this test, he came to be more and more distrustful of all existing methods of teaching. Particularly characteristic of his whole point of view were his changing judgments of Dr. Bell's, or the Madras, system, and the reasons for which he finally came to condemn it. This system, much and long talked-of, was an interesting attempt, first made in schools for the half-caste English boys of Madras, to teach the younger by the older pupils, and thus to eliminate the cheap and perfunctory instruction which was all that the schools had been able to afford, while stimulating the sense of honor among boys extraordinarily lacking in any sort of

<sup>1</sup> *The Excursion*, ix, 293-310.

personal *morale* or *esprit de corps*. The "system," besides being economical, seems to have made a moral appeal to the pupils not unlike that aimed at by Doctor Arnold at Rugby and in the best schools and reformatories of our own day. It was doubtless because of the thorough learning of what was learned at all, of the relative freedom and independence of the children, and of the moral discipline claimed for it, that Wordsworth for a time inclined to believe in it. In the early years of the century he enthusiastically advocated it, declaring in a letter to Thomas Poole in 1815, that "next to the art of printing" it was "the noblest invention for the improvement of the human species."<sup>1</sup> But he came in the end to question its usefulness and to deprecate any general adoption of it, not only because he thought it impossible that any system whatsoever could be applied to conditions so various as those of England, but because this particular system asserted an ideal of equality that he considered essentially wrong; because it overtrained the intellect while leaving untouched the spiritual and perceptive faculties; and, above all, because emulation was its master-spring, "the great wheel which puts every part of the machine into motion."<sup>2</sup>

But emphasis on practical, moral, and spiritual values easily turns into an arrogant anti-intellectualism, and Wordsworth's theories of education, vital and suggestive as they were, did not escape the narrow and reactionary tendencies of his thought. Nowhere is this more evident than in his objection to the introduction of the Madras system into the girls' schools of Ambleside and the surrounding region. Here he retreated frankly to a romantic past, calling "Shenstone's school-mistress, by her winter fire and in her summer garden-seat," to witness against "Dr. Bell's sour-looking teachers in petticoats."<sup>3</sup> In the training of girls he would entirely subordinate individual opportunities to the necessities or convenience of the com-

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Thomas Poole, March 13, 1815.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Hugh James Rose, 1828 (?).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Hugh James Rose, December 11, 1828.

munity. "What," he says, "is the use of pushing on the education of girls so fast? . . . What are you to do with these girls? What demand is there for the ability that they may have prematurely acquired? Will they not be indisposed to bend to any kind of hard labour or drudgery?"<sup>1</sup> In an address delivered in 1836 at the foundation of a school at Bowness, he further supported his position by an appeal to the judgment of parents, who, he said, were agreed that the training of girls should be "confined to reading, writing and arithmetic, and plain needle-work, or any other art favorable to economy and home-comforts."<sup>2</sup>

Such standards as these for the education of any class of workers seem at first sight wholly reactionary: they would limit the growth of the future by a state of society and a type of character that were the outcome of past conditions. Yet narrow and narrowing as his ideas tended to become in practical application, Wordsworth was among the foremost thinkers of his time in considering education not as an end in itself or as a means to personal power, but as conditioned by the needs and aims of the society of which it forms a part. He condemned the purely intellectual training of the schools, not only because of its one-sided over development of certain faculties, but because it failed to meet any social test. He constantly insisted upon the solidarity of the family in aim and interest, not only because he believed the educative power of the primal duties and responsibilities to be infinitely greater than any that could come from mere school-training, but because the welfare of the family, the elementary social unit and the centre of men's deepest affection, seemed to him doubly essential to the welfare of society. There was inevitably in Wordsworth's position some exaggeration of the truth for which he stood: protesting against a general tendency "to sacrifice the greater power to the less; all that life and nature teach, to the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hugh James Rose, December 11, 1828.

<sup>2</sup> Speech on Laying the Foundation-Stone of the New School in the Village of Bowness, Windermere, 1836.

little that can be learned from books and a master,"<sup>1</sup> he was too ready to forget the gain to society from the fuller development of the individual; he would ensure to the parents the education of responsibility for their children even when this responsibility entailed hardship and suffering, but if the child's growth in knowledge became in any degree unfavorable to the "tenderness of domestic life," he was willing to refuse it opportunities for education.

Yet remorseless as was this sacrifice of the individual to the community, it was exacted by Wordsworth in the belief that only through such sacrifice could the individual attain to that highly developed moral and emotional life in which his happiness must consist and by which must be tested every intellectual achievement as well as every material gain. Wordsworth's ideas on the education of the school are wholly consistent with his conception of the social function of knowledge. Of knowledge as an end in itself he thought little; he considered it to be but one, and that by no means the most important, of the elements that make for sanity and happiness. The power to read he regarded as chiefly desirable to those in need of more stimulus and variety than were offered by their daily lives. He was skeptical as to its advantages to a rural community, in which constant and various occupations, familiarity with friends, and intercourse with nature leave men neither time nor desire for reading; but he considered, on the other hand, that well-chosen books were absolutely necessary to the happiness of factory-workers, a class of men whose lives were monotonous in activity, who were themselves restless from constant liability to change, and whose conditions of living permitted only a relatively empty and uninteresting leisure. The "select library" that Wordsworth would allow them provides in such a case both the variety that the countryman finds in his daily occupation and the steady influence so necessary in unsettling and unnatural conditions; it might, he said, if it served no further purpose, "be of

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hugh James Rose, 1823(?)

the same use as a public dial, keeping everybody's clock in some kind of order."<sup>1</sup>

But though Wordsworth hoped little from the popularization of knowledge, he saw that it would inevitably go on. "The schoolmaster," he wrote, "is, and will remain, abroad. The thirst of knowledge is spreading and will spread, whether virtue and duty go along with it or no."<sup>2</sup> The schoolmaster has multiplied in the land, as Wordsworth prophesied, and in working out the problems of a democratic education, has come to recognize the truth of every principle on which Wordsworth insisted. An almost purely intellectual training is yielding, as we test it by the demands of real life, to one giving physical and aesthetic culture as well; as we gain a deeper sense of social solidarity, we are trying to educate our school-children, whether or not we prepare them directly to earn their living, to bear their part in the society in which they are to live; taught by our failure to deal with them in masses, we are beginning to see the primary importance of developing to the utmost independence and individuality of character in the schoolroom. Gradually we are coming to realize the value of Wordsworth's definition, at once conservative and radical, of the function of the school in the community. Consistently asserting the power of education to mould and elevate society, he yet refused to see in it the panacea for all social ills. The school is, he insisted, though perhaps the most important part of the community, yet but a part of it, and as such totally inadequate to carry on the work of the larger social whole. Not by falsely magnifying its office but by a wise regulation of all the life-processes of society can the community attain to genuine happiness. The partial good obtained through education might even, he thought, be in the end injurious, if, by palliating evils, it distracted attention from conditions inimical to social well-being. The infant schools of his day, for example, which cared for children while their mothers worked in

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Francis Wrangham, June 5, 1808.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Hugh James Rose, 1828(?).

factories or elsewhere for the support of the family, he judged to be in the first instance symptoms of a widespread distress and of a universally unsettled industrial condition; but they seemed to him positively pernicious in so far as they concealed the need for fundamental and most difficult reforms of the conditions which had produced them. The attempt to define the function of education, evident both in the demand for a truly social training and in the limitation of that training to a definite field, was parallel in its special sphere with Wordsworth's promulgation of an ideal of character and society based on the elementary virtues and, for the moment, limited to them. The claims of education were shorn of many pretensions, and its work was for the time being narrowly circumscribed. But the function assigned it, however modest, was essential, and allowed for a development undreamed of by the conservative Wordsworth.

Though Wordsworth's occasional utterances on public questions may be discredited as those of a layman, there can be no question that when he spoke of the nature of poetry it was as a master in his own field. His few pages of criticism are for imaginative insight and grasp of aesthetic principles to be compared only with the work of such fellow-poets as Ben Jonson and Dryden and Coleridge. They are, moreover, as truly the outcome of his social philosophy as are his opinions on education or the Poor Laws; and his theory of poetry is thus not merely the expression of an artist discussing his craft, but the formulation of a poetics of democracy. From 1798, when he announced his experiment in the *Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth never wavered in his conviction, either that poetry is vitally related to men's social life, or that the ideal society is essentially that in which his own imagination had been nurtured. There can be no doubt that his conceptions of the art were limited by taking as aim and measure of its possibilities the social situation which existed in a single small corner of England. But constant return to an actualized experience gave substance to what might else have been empty theory, and forced him to clearer perception both

of the essential elements of poetry and of the modern conditions in which it might develop.

In a very real sense Wordsworth laid down no new principles of poetry. Great critics have always been at one as to its essential nature, have invariably recognized as its basis that truth to the profoundest human experience which makes it a force only less strong than life itself. Their differences, and hence the growth of our body of aesthetic conceptions, lie not so much in disagreement as to fundamental principles as in the reinterpretation of these principles through a new understanding of life and character. The inclusive humanity that marked the thought and aim of the Revolution was the ground on which rested Wordsworth's distinctive contributions to the theory of poetry: namely, his acceptance of the universal experiences as the material of poetry, and his declaration that the poet's power, however exceptional in degree, was one in kind with that of his fellow men. The presentation of these ideas was, of course, beset with difficulties, and with difficulties only partially overcome by Wordsworth. Pioneers of thought have always to deal with new subject-matter by means of words and classifications primarily intended to explain past conceptions. So Wordsworth, than whom no one could have a more vital conception of the poet's office, described the language of poetry, in the vague and far-traveled phrase current in his time, as an imitation of the language of real life, thus coloring his idea of the spiritual incarnation involved in a work of art with the opposite conception of it as a transcript or copy of nature. A similar ambiguity, due perhaps to his one-sided appeal to the intuitive faculties, appears in his occasional awkward and superficial classifications, notably in his elaborately drawn and futile distinction between imagination and fancy. And the clearness and adequacy of his presentation were hindered by a certain argumentativeness of temper, as well as by the difficulty of finding a fit medium of expression. Wordsworth was a good fighter, and, flaunting a novel idea in the face of its opponents, he could not but over-

emphasize what was peculiar in his tenets, sometimes to the injury of his own cause.

But the contradictions into which the difficulties of his position led him were superficial and accidental; in effect he not only recognized and defined the forces at work in the new poetry, but enriched our conceptions of them by his finer penetration into their nature and sources. Like Aristotle, he declared that poetry, an art dealing directly with human life and character, is the most profound and philosophical of writing. But true to the best thought of his time, he recognized as the fitting theme of poetry, not the life of the great, but the life of the humble; not character in the throes of a hopeless struggle with fate or weakened by the more tragic division in its own elements, but character serene in the humility, moderation, and content of everyday life. The world in which Wordsworth's heroes appear is no longer the world of Greek myth, of mediaeval legend, of Elizabethan romance, of Augustan wit, but the daily round in which common people pursue their common duties with no other distinction than the supreme glory of their humanity. Such a conception of the solidarity of men, of their vital community in interests and needs, was not peculiar to Wordsworth, was not even peculiar to the democratic thinkers to whose party, in spite of his superficial conservatism, he essentially belonged; but in him it appears in one of its profoundest and most modern aspects, as conditioning a theory by which art can be justified only in so far as it exists for and by the people. Wordsworth's connection with the Romantic thinkers of his day was slight enough; allied to them, if at all, by his spiritual sensitiveness and the belief in an organic social order, he yet, by his genuine knowledge of men and belief in them, made human and democratic the transcendentalism and the worship of genius which led most of the Romanticists to a reactionary individualism. An æsthetic theory that seems more than obvious to readers of Tolstoi and Maeterlinck was a century ago a landmark in the development of a truly social philosophy of poetry.

Wordsworth's definition of the material that is essentially poetic involved a corresponding change in the conception of the poet's nature and function. To the critic of the Renaissance the poet seemed to join together things that have no connection in nature, and so by a divine act of imagination to shape new and beautiful existences in which ardent or weary spirits may rejoice; to the later seeker after law he appeared to unite, in a transcendent work of art, the mysterious inspiration that separates him from other men with the reason that he holds in common with them; to the humanist of democracy he is for the first time "a man speaking to men," a seer whose revelation of fresh realms of experience is possible, because his hearers, however mute and inglorious, are gifted with some share of the imagination which grows to its height in him. The poet's fit audience is made up, not of the "few who see by artificial lights,"<sup>1</sup> but of the many "enriched"

"With human kindnesses and simple joys."<sup>2</sup>

The true judges of poetic excellence, says Wordsworth in a letter, are to be found among men "who lead the simplest lives, and those most according to nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who, having known these things, have outgrown them."<sup>3</sup> Such readers, open to impressions of the loftiest thought conveyed in the simplest and most lifelike language, he trusted to bring about the saner and fuller living, the deeper emotional and moral experience, in which he placed his hope for the race. They were chiefly to be found, he thought, not among the refined and cultured, but among children and the workers in cottages and fields, in whom daily experience has strengthened those "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind"<sup>4</sup> which alone could triumph over all that assailed character in the turbulent years when he wrote.

<sup>1</sup> *The Prelude*, XIII, 210.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to John Wilson, date undetermined.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

The imagination which these readers shared in their degree with the poet, was to Wordsworth supreme in the intellectual hierarchy, because mystically one with the divine power moving the universe. This sense of the vital and creative nature of the imagination, which made it at once the mightiest and most mysterious of the forces known to man, was, of course, no more peculiar to Wordsworth than was his belief in the poetic capacities of humble and lowly life; a constant, and sometimes a dominating element in earlier thought, it was especially prevalent at the opening of the nineteenth century, when, while scientists and novelists were turning more and more to the study of common things and people, the mystics and philosophers of the Romantic school were delighting to see in the unfathomable activity of a universal and divine faculty at once the explanation of existence and the justification of a capricious or egoistic individual experience. But Wordsworth, uniting, perhaps unconsciously, ideas widely separated in origin, humanized the lofty claims which he made for the poetic function by his conception of the essential identity of the poet with other men. Nor was this leveling of character and power in his theory, any more than in his poetry, a leveling down. The imagination, if a universal gift, was yet the noblest faculty of man; the faculty that allied humanity most closely with the great creative spirit of the universe, was still the gift of the lowliest of the sons of earth.

The greatness of Wordsworth lies, as every reader knows, not in his philosophy but in his poetry. His poetry, however, was inevitably conditioned by his philosophy. Great as it was, it might have been still greater, had not the revelation of the new world of the future that gave meaning to life in his early years been too quickly staled into commonplace. Wordsworth never really believed in the dominant forces that in his time were working for righteousness; and, as he separated himself more and more from the current of the age, he was increasingly driven to emphasize the reactionary, non-progressive elements in principles capable of a far-reaching and fruitful

application. What was productive and progressive in his thought, instead of developing through the years, grew more obscure as the problems of practical life more and more baffled his attempts at solution. Wordsworth indeed remained true to that revelation of his youth that had brought him from the house of bondage; but the ideal in which he lived, cut off from saving contact with the life of the age, hardened into a certain pedantry through its much repetition. His optimism came in time to deserve the reproach, so often bestowed upon it, of facility, narrowness, unreality.

This early stagnation of his thinking, and the gradual decline of his poetic and intellectual faculties, is the result of the real tragedy of Wordsworth's life — his failure "to abide in reason to the uttermost." "For the modern man," says Professor Rebec, "the divorce of genius and reason from understanding is not genius and reason liberated, but genius and reason rendered just so far perverse or null."<sup>1</sup> This great truth Wordsworth never recognized. M. Legouis has pointed out the evils that may possibly have grown from his dependence on his sister during the period of his restoration. Sensitive and poetic, the devoted admirer of her brother, she delighted in the exquisite observation and feeling of his poetry while stimulating him not at all to the severer intellectual disciplines.<sup>2</sup> It is a hard judgment that condemns the most devoted of sisters because she was not the most philosophic of friends; and we have no proof in Wordsworth's history that under any influence he could have transcended the limitations that actually existed in his thought. In truth, it was by his distrust of the understanding, that he paid the penalty of living in one of those great eras when the human mind, torn up by the roots, must perish or make what shift it can in a new habitat. Wordsworth, forced to keep faith with a world that had belied its promise, was content neither to reassert his earlier belief with Godwin, nor like Byron courageously to despair in the ruin of

<sup>1</sup> "Byron and Morals," *International Journal of Ethics*, October, 1903.

<sup>2</sup> *La Jeunesse de Wordsworth*, ed. 1896, pp. 322-7.

his hopes, nor to return like Shelley with unwearied ardor to the field of battle, nor to wander with Keats into new lands of beauty; in the wreck of hopes and creeds he was compelled by his inner nature to rediscover the world of human life that he had lost. It was the just reward of his unflinching integrity that he entered into and possessed some part of the promised land. But his possession of it was partial; he never really understood the nature or enjoyed the abundance of the country in which he dwelt. Full possession and mastery of it was to be the reward of those workers whose pedestrian thought wrought out the earlier dream of the poet; he, having seen the vision, had no energy left to shape the world in its image.

“Vision and faith must come back from their flights, and face unflinchingly the remorseless challenge . . . of thorough-going, grim reason,” says the writer already quoted.<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth was at first able to meet courageously the challenge of facts; but facts he accepted as static and final, never testing them by that “thorough-going, grim reason” that leads to truth. Never of those who reason, he revolted finally from the service of the understanding when he threw off the yoke of Godwinism; and, in spite of his “poet’s scorn of scorn,” he was unable throughout his life to deal fairly or calmly with the mental habit that in his susceptible years had carried him far out of the orbit of his nature. “A bigot to a new idolatry,” he had for a brief time “laboured to cut off” his heart from the sympathy and perception that were the sources of his natural strength and to

“unsoul  
. . . . . by syllogistic words  
Those mysteries of being which have made,  
And shall continue evermore to make,  
Of the whole human race one brotherhood.”<sup>2</sup>

The agony endured through the “corruption” of his feeling by this unnatural effort, the weariness and despair which resulted from his attempt to live in the alien element of abstract

<sup>1</sup> Professor George Rebec.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prelude*, XII, 83-7.

thought, not only prevented him from the normal development of a genuinely courageous and philosophic point of view, but biased his judgment of the intellectual activities themselves. In an age when science was calling forth men's best efforts, Wordsworth could see in analysis and classification nothing but the operations of a "meddling intellect"; and refusing to think or to recognize the place of the understanding in the intellectual economy, he paid the penalty that follows disloyalty to any aspect of life or nature. In the first crisis of his life, the wreck of his early religion of humanity, he proved the strength and courage and sanity of his spirit beyond any man of his generation. In the second he failed. This second crisis, the crisis of middle age that John Morley declares the final test of a man's nature, came early to Wordsworth and found him ill-prepared to meet it; for even in the hour of his first victory he had renounced the "grim reason," the enthusiasm for the whole truth, that guide the greatest men to their final, unembittered, unillusioned knowledge of reality. As the hopes of Wordsworth's great years narrowed, he found no larger vision to take their place, he attained to no deeper comprehension of the forces at work for the upbuilding of mankind. Thus his message not only remained incomplete; it was obscured by the timid conventionalism and narrow prejudices of his long old age. Yet even the poetry of his many dull years echoes with the solemn joy of his discovery that the kingdom of God was to be found in the abodes of the humble, and that in the light of this fact a radiant natural hope had dawned upon mankind.



## **SHELLEY'S DEMOCRACY**



## SHELLEY'S DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

IN the years following the French Revolution radical democracy accepted from the great thinkers of the eighteenth century an unquestioning belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature, the earthly brotherhood of men, and the responsibility of government for the welfare of the people. Its special task was to transform these large ideas, which an earlier generation had imagined so easy of realization, into such motives and habits of daily life as would make possible a genuine democracy. But the transmutation of democratic theory into democratic consciousness, a slow and difficult process in the most favorable circumstances, was made well-nigh impossible by the social and intellectual condition of England in the beginning of the nineteenth century. These years were for England years of an economic revolution hardly less profound, though far less evident, than the political revolution of France. The introduction of machinery was recreating — and threatening — its social and industrial life; the spread of scientific knowledge and methods was beginning to influence the general habit of thought; new problems and a new viewpoint were everywhere demanding the reconstruction of existing institutions and accepted ideas.

On this England, for the most part already radically changed, but unconscious of the crisis through which it was passing, the violence and excess of the French Revolution fell like a blight. The course of progress seemed for the time to be turned back, and the liberty of which Englishmen had boasted to be vanquished by the double weight of legal oppression and popular prejudice. Perplexed by the course of events in France

<sup>1</sup> For all references to Shelley's writings, unless otherwise specified, see: *The Poetical and Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. B. Forman, London, 1880.

and terrified lest worse befall at home, Englishmen temporarily united in uncompromising championship of familiar institutions, and fiercest denunciations of any plan that might even remotely look toward change. Against such an opposition, radical, or even liberal, thinkers were for the moment powerless. But though their cause was apparently lost, they were in reality co-workers with the forces shaping the future: they appealed to those larger motives, which, panic and intellectual inertia once cast off, must awaken a response in the disinterested and generous. Moreover, the necessity of that reorganization for which they pleaded was brought home to men's business and bosoms by industrial and moral evils everywhere challenging the established order of society.

This double movement, the reaction against Revolutionary ideas and the protest against that reaction, was everywhere reflected in the poetry of the nineteenth century. Scott turned resolutely from speculation of every sort to mediaeval tradition. Coleridge dreamed and preached of a new society; but he laid its foundations in the religious and political institutions inherited from the past. Wordsworth saved the ideal of the Revolution for humanity; but he saved it by reducing human nature and human opportunity to material and intellectual mediocrity. Byron vindicated the right of the individual to freedom; but his conception of freedom was hardly more social than that of the most philistine of his opponents. A similar failure in range and depth of social thought appeared hardly less markedly in the poets of the next generation. Tennyson, with all his enthusiasm for science and his sense of human solidarity, deprecated the democratic tendencies of his age and found the means of escape from its immediate problems in a mystic apprehension of the unseen. Browning, though crowning his philosophy with the halo of orthodoxy, limited his song as frankly as did Byron to the experiences and claims of the individual soul. The work of these poets was deep-rooted in the actual life of the time, nobly representative of an England which, though insular in its prejudices and content with past or passing ideas, was ener-

getic, rich in experience, and eager for the restoration of spiritual ideals. Compared with these spokesmen of two generations, the poets who championed the unpopular cause of democracy were few in number and aliens in their own age. Yet their work, while sometimes unsubstantial because of its isolation from the main thought-currents of the time, has a quality that is all its own, — what John Morley calls "the presentiment of the eve," prescient faith in forces that were barely beginning to be. For the belief in humanity which is the watchword of democracy was in those days of reaction held by faith rather than by sight; and those who made it their creed, whatever their other gifts, were true seers in that they looked toward the things not seen; that their words were words of promise rather than of fulfillment.

Because of its championship of ideas at first universally discredited and only gradually coming to their own, the poetry of democracy, though relatively small in bulk and too little reminiscent of earth, played an important part in the life of the last century. The right of men to freedom was upheld by Landor in the darkest years of reaction. Faith in the capacities and destinies of the race inspired Swinburne's noblest songs and was the foundation for Emerson's serene joy in life. Whitman discovered the perfect ideal democracy in the everyday world, where equality was firm planted on earth, where brotherhood lived in common service, and where the lowliest life shared with the highest the nobility of humanity. Shelley was second to none of these poets, either in the fervor of his belief in mankind or in the persistency of his efforts to make that belief prevail in the world. He occupied, moreover, a peculiar place in their succession. With Godwin and Landor he accepted in its fullness the democratic tradition of the eighteenth century, but, as a true child of post-Revolutionary England, he was forced by the odds against which he struggled to a depth of understanding possible neither to the thinkers from whom he inherited his beliefs nor to the poets who, like Wordsworth, had endured the first shock of the Revolution. He was thus a link

between two generations, reasserting the truth of principles that had moved the eighteenth century in a world that had been cut off from its past, and apprehending those principles in the more universal, vital, and spiritual sense which gave them validity for the future.

The ideas that make Shelley in some respects seem almost our contemporary, not only set him utterly at variance with his own age, but long delayed recognition of the intellectual value of his poetry. To the overwhelmingly legal and practical minds of pre-Victorian England, his uncompromising appeal to principles, his insistence on spiritual freedom as the condition of goodness, the radiant idealism of his social and ethical system, were meaningless or sacrilegious; and even when, toward the middle of the century, concern for ideas became more disinterested as well as more general, the theories upheld by him were as remote from current thought as the visions of the most Utopian dreamer. Of late years, though his position in the advance-guard of his generation has been established beyond cavil and the fundamental importance of the questions with which he dealt is beginning to be generally admitted, critics continue to condemn his position, or to relegate his theories to the limbo of departed vanities. Leslie Stephen declares that Shelley's earlier poetry, especially *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam*, echoes "much inexpressibly dreary rant which has deafened us from a thousand platforms," and characterizes his land of promise as "an unsubstantial phantasmagoria in the clouds."<sup>1</sup> A classicist like Mr. Courthope renders in more prosaic terms Matthew Arnold's earlier description of the poet as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain,"<sup>2</sup> when he styles him "the Don Quixote of poetry," and urges that his radicalism, his attempt to establish a purely ideal society, leaves no basis of fact for his art.<sup>3</sup> Kingsley's statement that Shelley's life was

<sup>1</sup> *Cornhill Magazine*, March, 1879.

<sup>2</sup> "Byron," *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*, ed. 1888, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> "Scott, Byron, Shelley," *Liberal Movement in English Literature*, ed. 1885, pp. 144, 156.

"a denial of external law, and a substitution in its place of internal sentiment,"<sup>1</sup> is repeated by ultra-conservatives of all types, who see in Shelley the anarchist in creed and art as well as in conduct.

These charges of ineffectiveness, of slightness and unsubstantiality of thought, of defiance of moral law, still current among authoritative critics, were all but universal during the early years of the nineteenth century. Even among the radical thinkers with whom Shelley was identified in principles and aim, appreciation of his social philosophy came slowly, the poetic idealism of his teachings being hardly less remote from their sympathy than from the understanding of their conservative contemporaries. It was, indeed, only in the last third of the nineteenth century that his place as one of the reconstructive thinkers of its early years began to be generally recognized in critical circles. An anonymous writer in the *North British Review* in 1870<sup>2</sup> argued that Shelley was among the first to perceive the forces at work in the new democracy. In 1886 there appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* an article pointing out the practicability of his political ideas, and calling attention to the fact that many of the reforms proposed by him either had been accomplished or were then accepted as open to discussion.<sup>3</sup> In 1887 a lecture delivered to the Shelley Society tried to prove the thesis, doubtless suggested by Marx, that Shelley was a Socialist.<sup>4</sup> Since that time critics have increasingly testified to his character of social and moral seer. Mr. Revell, in an article on *Shelley's Prometheus Unbound* in 1907, says that Shelley fulfills one of the

<sup>1</sup> "Thoughts on Shelley and Byron," *Literary and General Essays*, ed. 1888, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> October.

<sup>3</sup> July.

<sup>4</sup> *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 183. The following sentence from Marx was quoted in this lecture: "The real difference between Shelley and Byron is this: those who understand them and love them rejoice that Byron died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary *bourgeois*; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of Socialism."

great functions of the poet by holding "the mirror up to nature as she is tending to become."<sup>1</sup> Professor Woodberry declares that Shelley's political, social and religious beliefs, far from being unusual, were but "the simple truths whose acceptance by the world goes on so slowly," that his genius had the "prescience by which it seized the elements of the future yet inchoate, and glorified them, and won the hearts of men . . . fervently to desire their coming."<sup>2</sup> The recognition of Shelley's place in modern thought indicated by these few quotations may be lightly dismissed by the unsympathetic as Utopian echoes of an earlier Utopian; but there is no disputing that such judgments as these, whether right or wrong, represent the convictions of some of the most scholarly as well as the most vital among present-day thinkers.

But if Shelley's teachings were recognized but slowly by professional critics, they were from the very first a powerful influence among the radical workingmen of England. Stopford Brooke, in his inaugural address to the Shelley Society in 1886, declared that Shelley was then recognized as their interpreter by the thoughtful members of the laboring class; that as the poor and the oppressed themselves came to understand the ideas that moved them, they found in him at once their poet and priest.<sup>3</sup> But the influence of Shelley over the radical poor, so lately remarked by Stopford Brooke, had in reality begun in the early decades of the century. The interest of readers of this class would seem to have centered in *Queen Mab*, a poem written before Shelley was twenty-one and embodying the ideas in which he then passionately trusted for the reform of the world. Though the doctrines laid down in it were never abandoned by him, they were later developed in far nobler form; and the poet, absorbed in the composition of *Prometheus Unbound* or *The Cenci* or *Charles the First*, would seem almost to have forgotten the work of his youth<sup>4</sup> when it was

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Review*, October.

<sup>2</sup> *Makers of Literature*, ed. 1900, pp. 415, 435-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Horatio Smith, Sept. 14, 1821.

brought into a wholly accidental prominence. As it could not pass the censor, *Queen Mab* had never been published, though it had been printed privately and a number of copies had been distributed. In Shelley's trial for the guardianship of his children, it was, however, offered as evidence of his moral and religious unfitness for the office, and, possibly in consequence of this notoriety, was after 1821 so constantly the prey of piratical publishers that the poet was finally in self-defense driven to reprint it. Though these circumstances doubtless greatly increased the influence of the book, it appealed to its radical constituency primarily by virtue of its radical propaganda and its direct rather than imaginative presentation of ideas. It is significant that the notes, setting forth Shelley's theories on everything, from vegetarianism to religion, seem to have been hardly less influential than the poem itself. Mr. Buxton Forman says that a "vest-pocket" edition published in 1826, was "regarded at the time as an edition for the 'mechanic and labourer'"; that a cheap edition in 1833 was "largely consumed by the Owenites," — to whom, he adds, "*Queen Mab* is said to have stood in the position of a gospel"; and that, when he himself went to London as a boy in 1860, he found still current an edition, based on one issued still earlier by a firm of "notable free-thought and free-press publishers," which had played an important part in the "unsettlement" of English ideas in the mid-years of the century.<sup>1</sup> The long-continued influence of Shelley over the radical workmen of England indicated by the history of *Queen Mab* forms a striking commentary on Matthew Arnold's judgment: "The Shelley of actual life is a vision of beauty and radiance, indeed, but availing nothing, effecting nothing."<sup>2</sup> The fact that the men who were among the first to lay Shelley's gospel to heart were primarily concerned with the sternest realities bears testimony not only to a genuine humanity but to some measure of practicability in ideas judged to be chimerical by more conventional thinkers.

<sup>1</sup> *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 30-3.

<sup>2</sup> "Shelley," *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*, ed. 1888, p. 251-2.

Shelley's social creed, however influenced by the peculiar qualities of his own mind or the social conditions of England during his youth, was drawn chiefly from the French philosophers of the eighteenth century. But though there is sufficient testimony to his direct knowledge of the writings of these philosophers, he was moved by them chiefly as they were interpreted by William Godwin, perhaps the greatest and certainly in post-Revolutionary years the most influential spokesman of radical ideas in England. Godwin stood by no means alone in his defense of the principles on which the Revolutionists had acted. A sermon preached before a revolutionary society in London was the occasion of Burke's *Reflections*, which may be taken to mark the beginning of the counter-revolution in England. This book, itself the classic expression of the conservative temper, called out many answers; and one of them, Paine's *Rights of Man*, though lacking the profound insight into men and affairs that constitutes the greatness of the *Reflections*, made a plea for France that rested on a far stronger foundation of fact and logic. Thelwall and the group of democrats with whom he was associated represented a small but determined minority, which held tenaciously to radical beliefs during the early years of reactionary conservatism. Bentham and James Mill, whose work left so strong a mark on the next two generations, never paused in their investigations of the legal and political institutions of their time, or in their demand for a more reasonable and equitable social system.

Among these men, who carried on in such different ways the tradition of the eighteenth century, Godwin was peculiarly the interpreter of its philosophy. The effect on him of the catastrophe that was overwhelming Europe was to fire him with new zeal for the beliefs to which his early allegiance had been given; and, when driven to defend his principles by the violence of the attacks on them, he forthwith set out to vindicate them both against the conservatives who had renounced them, and the radicals who were equally betraying them by their defense of the actual course of the Revolution. *Political Justice*, pub-

lished in the year of the Terror and allowed to pass the censors only because it was supposed that a three-guinea book could do little harm, recapitulates much of the thought of the eighteenth century as to human nature, education, and progress. But it is the passion of faith running through its geometrically demonstrated arguments, a passion generated in the overthrow of old conditions and the darkness shadowing the birth of a new humanity, that gives the book its peculiar quality, an intellectual fervor which stirs the soul through its appeal to reason hardly less than do the "beautiful idealisms" of the imagination. This energy of faith which touches its abstractions into life, made its author the most effective medium of communication between the old order and the new. During the years following the outbreak of the Revolution he was a center of radical influence in London from which not even those escaped who, like Lamb, were indifferent to theory, or, like Coleridge, were too mystic and absolute in philosophy finally to join the ranks of utilitarians and experientialists.

It was, of course, inevitable that the quintessential rationalism of Godwin's position, which made him the rallying-point for the enthusiasts and idealists of the day, should have a repellent and negative influence on practical, conservative, and concrete thinkers. Wordsworth, for instance, learned of the philosopher into whose orbit a youthful ardor for the principles of the Revolution had brought him, nothing better than a misunderstanding of his position absurd to the point of caricature and an enduring scorn for the whole process of intellectual analysis. But in Shelley, enthusiastic for freedom, idealistic in temperament, and familiar with Godwin in the first flush of his youth, we see the full force of the older thinker's power to stimulate and inspire. Shelley later wrote that Godwin had been to the age in moral philosophy what Wordsworth had been in poetry;<sup>1</sup> and his own appropriation, repetition, and development of Godwin's ideas are an even more significant acknowledgment of his debt than the admiration which out-

<sup>1</sup> "Remarks on Mandeville and Mr. Godwin," *Prose Works*, vol. III, p. 4.

lived the disillusion of intimate personal intercourse with the hero of his early years.

But though Shelley drew his philosophy in the main from the eighteenth century, the particular form which he gave it was determined by the condition of England during his boyhood and youth. Life moved fast in those years of catastrophe and counter-catastrophe, and Shelley, born at the very height of the Revolution, grew up in a world that at every point challenged his belief in freedom and progress, a world in which the average Englishman, conservative to the point of bigotry, was buried in a self-content that allowed for no play of thought, and dreamed of no need for social change. His relations with his father, apparently a thoroughly conventional man, well stocked with worldly wisdom, and his experiences at school, where he suffered deeply from the unrestrained tyranny of the selfish and strong among his fellows, early sharpened his sense of the heartless brutality of a society with which his fine-wrought nature was ill-fitted to cope. His antagonism to the materialistic code of the people in the midst of whom he grew up was further strengthened by the suffering, inhumanity, and governmental tyranny everywhere evident to the intelligent observer. The luxury of the few and the degrading poverty prevailing among great masses of the people; the tyranny of a public opinion barely beginning to consider Catholic emancipation and Irish representation possible; the rigor with which the censorship of all publications was enforced and the free expression of unpopular truths effectually hindered; the prevalent immorality, hypocritical and cynical, due to the lack of any deep social enthusiasm even more than to the life of the court and the flaunting arrogance of wealth,—all these united to convince an ardent believer in progress of the need of radical changes in the whole social fabric.

Nor was there in such a state of affairs any chance for the buoyant faith in the easy victory of good that had satisfied the pre-Revolutionists. Between them and the England of Shelley's youth lay the gulf of a great experience and a great

failure, in the light of which even the most optimistic could hope for no speedy conquest over evil. Shelley was thus compelled to recognize, not only the wrongs existing in the society around him, but the difficulties that were to be overcome in eradicating them. The spirit in which those difficulties were to be met, he defines in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam*. Experience teaches, he says, that the reform of society is to be brought about "by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue." His Irish addresses reiterate his belief that, however great the practical difficulties, any genuine improvement in the condition of mankind is to be brought about only by combined and long-continued effort. Among the noblest passages in his poetry are those which record, as does the opening soliloquy of Prometheus, the perfected work of perseverance in well-doing; or which, like Cythna's speech to the conquered Laon, sing the hope which has passed through the defeat of its dearest purposes into the larger hope of human achievement. It was, indeed, his perception of the largeness as well as of the greatness of the task of reform that made Shelley's reincarnation of revolutionary doctrines so potent a force in the later history of democracy. He was among the moulders of the future, not only because of his faith in mankind, but because he had laid to heart the lesson of experience, had learned something of the marvelous complexity of the right social order as of the men and women who must create it, had recognized the need of infinite patience, wisdom, and endeavor if social conditions are to be fundamentally changed.

Shelley's philosophic creed, fashioned from the theories of his radical predecessors to meet the exigencies of a bankrupt age, was deeply marked with the stamp of his personality. A Platonist of Platonists, he united in himself the two strains, so often divorced from each other, of the Platonic tradition: a mystic sense of things unseen and a belief in ideas as the realities that inform and control action. His schemes of reform, his moral

code, his appreciation of beauty, his personal experience, were all colored by his abiding sense of a supreme spiritual force revealed in and through the visible world, and of the enduring potency in human life of truth, the embodiment of men's knowledge of this supreme reality. He was thus primarily concerned with the principles of action rather than with actions themselves, and, like Coleridge, whom he in several respects strikingly resembled, tended to forget the tangible fact in enthusiasm for the idea it represented or illustrated. This preoccupation with the moving principles of things conditioned the whole body of his poetry; it was as evident when he sang of his more intimately personal moods as when he set forth the social philosophy he felt hardly less deeply. Even the critics who appreciate the scope of this philosophy are likely to discount the value of his personal poetry by putting it in a class by itself, and labeling it metaphysical or unreal. The distinction they make, resting ultimately in a somewhat crude antithesis between the personal and the impersonal, or the real and the imaginary, was utterly foreign to Shelley's habit of thought. The characters and the types of experience portrayed in *Alastor* and *Epipygmidion*, however remote from our everyday life, can no more be dismissed as lacking in serious human content than those professedly dealing with social reform. The poet imaging forth a new and prophetic reality created, it is true, a world remote from the familiar phases of experience, but he made his characters live and move with self-consistent realism in this world of his creation. Laon, Cythna, and Prometheus are easily recognized as children of the better social order for which he hoped; but in their freedom from meanness and suspicion, self-interest and violence, as well as in their primary aim to secure the well-being of their fellow-men, they are akin to the most highly developed individuals in existing communities. The hero of *Alastor* and the lover in *Epipygmidion* are characters of the same type in more personal and intimate relations, and reveal themselves, hardly less than the protagonists of freedom, as real persons, however exalted and truth-

loving, however impassioned for the ideal and responsive to a supersensuous loveliness.

Shelley himself recognized that the experiences which he presented lay outside the range of common knowledge. Speaking of *Epipsychedion*, he wrote to Mr. Gisborne that "real flesh and blood" were not among the articles he dealt in; that one "might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton, as expect anything human or earthly" from him.<sup>1</sup> But this passing disclaimer of a flesh-and-blood reality was hardly true to Shelley's abiding conception of human nature, which he believed to be in essence so militantly intellectual and spiritual as to exclude all that was grossly material. His faith in the future of the race, as in the moral power of each individual, rested on the conviction that men's capacity for spiritual development was infinite, while their material demands must, through the growth of higher faculties, be more and more limited to actual physical necessities; not only was the simplest and plainest of living the absolute condition of high thinking and noble feeling, but true simplicity became possible only as men entered into possession of the higher realms of consciousness. The ethereal experiences of his chosen spirits, incomprehensible though they be to the flesh-tethered sense of many readers, thus formed a component part of the actual world in which Shelley's mind lived and freely moved.

Shelley's interest in social matters developed early, and because of the peculiar intensity of his temperament was deeply colored by the circumstances of his life. According to Mr. Dowden, the most momentous events of his boyhood were the two dedications of himself recorded in his poetry: the dedication of his imagination to the service of beauty and the dedication of "his moral being to justice, gentleness and freedom."<sup>2</sup> These vows, however superficially opposed, were in reality united in Shelley's profound sense of human brotherhood. It was while "musing deeply on the lot of life,"<sup>3</sup> that he was led

<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Gisborne, October 22, 1821.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Shelley*, ed. 1886, vol. 1, pp. 36-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, stanza 5.

to devote himself to the service of beauty; and the resolve that he would be henceforth "wise, and just, and free, and mild," was inspired by

"one echo from a world of woes —  
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes,"<sup>1</sup>

which, falling on his ears as he walked over the grass outside Sion House Academy, "burst his spirit's sleep" and called him to take arms against oppression in every form. But we need no such testimony as this to prove that zeal for freedom and humanity was, from the first, warp and woof of Shelley's consciousness. It appeared in his earliest extant poems, which are full of rebellion against the rule of force, of satire on the vices of the times, and of a genuine, though conventional, enthusiasm for liberty; and it manifested itself even in his boyhood in his courageous protests against evil and falsehood wherever he met them. In Eton he rebelled against the flogging system. In 1811 at Oxford he attacked what he considered intolerance and bigotry by the publication of the tract entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, — and suffered expulsion rather than yield to the injustice that denied him the right to speak his mind. In 1812 he wrote the *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, protesting on grounds, not of legal but of moral justice, against the condemnation of Daniel Isaac Eaton for publishing the third part of Paine's *Age of Reason*. In the autumn of the same year he set out on his campaign of propaganda in Ireland, and in 1813 published *Queen Mab*, the first of his important if not of his great poems. The prosaic and didactic character of *Queen Mab* has been often pointed out. Leslie Stephen, for instance, says that many of its pages read like passages of *Political Justice* done into verse,<sup>2</sup> and Buxton Forman describes it as Shelley's "first serious essay at large in the quixotic task of reforming the world by preaching."<sup>3</sup> But though its poetry was unpoetic, *Queen Mab* has the double interest of giving a singularly

<sup>1</sup> Dedication to *Laon and Cythna*, stanza 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Cornhill Magazine*, March, 1879.

<sup>3</sup> *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 22.

complete epitome of Shelley's ideas and of being his first important attempt to embody them in imaginative form.

These ideas are nowhere more clearly stated than in the magnificent lyric in *The Revolt of Islam*, published five years later than *Queen Mab*, in which Cythna chants the triumph of the people's cause. Shelley's imagination had by this time taken full possession of his philosophy; and his ideas, wherever he got them and however they had been developed, were presented with consequent entirety and force. Cythna, addressing the nations victorious over evil, was herself the embodiment of the good for which they hoped, as she

"Stood, 'mid the throngs which ever ebbed and flowed  
Like light amid the shadows of the sea  
Cast from one cloudless star."<sup>1</sup>

Her song is a threefold triumph. First, it sings the enfranchisement of mankind from

"Faith, and Folly,  
Custom, and Hell, and mortal Melancholy,"

and calls upon the "irresistible children" of Wisdom to live a life where

"Scorn, and Hate,  
Revenge and Selfishness are desolate,"

where

"A hundred nations swear that there shall be  
Pity and Peace and Love, among the good and free!"<sup>2</sup>

Then it celebrates the reign of that "eldest of things, divine Equality," in whose long-desired coming the heart of nature and of man rejoices, and under whose rule love becomes the single law of life. And, finally, it declares the new power that has at last come to rule the earth:—

"Thoughts have gone forth whose powers can sleep no more!  
\* \* \* \* \* Almighty Fear,  
The Fiend-God, when our charmèd name he hear,  
Shall fade like shadow from his thousand fanes,  
While Truth with Joy enthroned o'er his lost empire reigns!"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, canto v, stanza 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 and 2. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Nor does Cythna pause with this lyric apotheosis of the great principles controlling social and individual life, — freedom, equality, and the power of mind to make the world a fit place to live in: she insists on applying these principles to definite conditions and problems. Equality is the basal social fact, freedom the one condition of human happiness. The political corollary is inevitable: the only government that has a right to exist is that which Shelley elsewhere describes as the "perfect and genuine republic," comprehending every living being.<sup>1</sup> The principles of justice are applied to men's social and moral relations as inexorably as to questions of politics. In a truly moral society goodness becomes possible only through voluntary allegiance to ends set itself by a free personality. In proportion, therefore, as men become good, institutions — whether of marriage-tie or binding promise, priestly office or church-organization — are recognized as the shackles of slavery: faith is to be liberated from prescription, domestic life enfranchised from the power of the man no less than from the dependence of the woman; children are to be freed from the tyranny of arbitrary control; love is to be "lawless" in the sense that it follows the law of its own nature. The new declaration of equality extends even to the animal world. Never again, says Cythna in the hour when right seems to have triumphed, —

"may blood of bird or beast  
Stain with its venomous stream a human feast."

The dwellers of the earth and air  
Shall throng around our steps in gladness  
Seeking their food or refuge there." <sup>2</sup>

Nor does this inclusive democracy benefit beast and bird alone; according to Shelley, men gain from the abolition of flesh-eating and its attendant brutalities greater freedom from disease and a widened sympathy with all living things.

In this picture of a world ruled by justice, Cythna, though

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Christianity, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, canto v, stanza 51, 5.

she briefly suggested the power of thought to beautify life through art and science, and to free men's minds from fear and superstition, emphasized the practical results of the new reign of freedom rather than the methods by which the cause of right might triumph. Later, when her faith in "the dawn of mind" which was to illumine the world had been betrayed, and humanity was again delivered to slavery and shame, she developed far more fully, in speaking of her hope for the future, the grounds on which it rested and the means by which it might be brought about. "The passion for reforming the world," says Mr. Buxton Forman, "was with Shelley not only a passion for attaining somehow to the supremacy of good and the abolition of evil, but also for reforming fundamentally the means of reform."<sup>1</sup> For resisting evil and emancipating mankind from its material and spiritual slavery, Shelley trusted wholly to the spread of knowledge, the growth of sympathy, and the convincing power of truth. His was no half-hearted acceptance of a doctrine of peace which might need to be enforced by the sword, of an appeal to reason till such time as his cause merited the support of authority; as firm as Tolstoi in his refusal to meet violence with violence, he could trust, even in the hour of defeat, to the ultimate triumph of good. To this mood of resolute confidence in the power of mind to vanquish evil, Cythna gave perfect expression when forced to recognize the failure of her dearest hopes. Doomed to die by a world that had belied its promise, and finding the earnest of her early faith only in the hearts of herself and her lover, she still relied on moral and intellectual means for the diffusion of truth:—

"Our many thoughts and deeds . . . .

Immortally must live, and burn, and move,  
When we shall be no more."<sup>2</sup>

This belief in the power of thought is, moreover, rational rather than sentimental; it rests ultimately on necessity,

<sup>1</sup> *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, canto IX, stanza 30.

which links cause and effect together, and, compelling like to bring forth like to all time, assures the final triumph of good. There is a Godwinian elation in her words: —

“One comes behind,  
Who aye the future to the past will bind —  
Necessity, whose sightless strength forever  
Evil with evil, good with good must wind  
In bonds of union, which no power may sever:  
They must bring forth their kind, and be divided never!”<sup>1</sup>

Nothing is more characteristic of Shelley than the definite practical conclusions drawn from his general principles. The charge of vagueness, so often urged against his ideas, can seldom be sustained by reference to his social doctrines, which are continually pushed to the point of application. Theory and practice were, in fact, always identical to him: what he preached he lived, and what he did he believed to be philosophically justifiable. His character was singularly of a piece. His spiritual philosophy was illustrated by personal habits refined to asceticism; his esteem for knowledge was paralleled by his impassioned pursuit of it; the kindness and justice that he preached, he practiced, both in a devotion to his friends that paused at no sacrifice of thought or strength or money, and in a care for the poor that made him respond instantly and adequately to the call of need; the principles in which he believed were supported by constant study of the conditions to which those principles had to be applied. As long as he made England his home he worked actively for the cause of freedom. The most familiar instance of this is his campaign in Ireland, whither he went in 1812, when he was scarcely twenty years old, to teach the doctrines of justice and self-control that he believed essential if Irishmen were to win national independence, — or for the sole purpose, as he himself said, of adding his little stock of usefulness to the fund which he hoped Ireland possessed.<sup>2</sup> His whole

<sup>1</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, canto ix, stanza 27.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Hamilton Rowan, February 25, 1812.

early life, moreover, gives proof of his vital interest in public matters, especially when the welfare or liberty of any class of persons was affected, and when ill health and enforced absence from England compelled him to give up active practical efforts for the dissemination of his beliefs and to limit himself to what he considered less immediately effective teaching through poetry, he lost not a whit, either of his interest in the events of the day or of his desire to use them in the service of reform.

*Hellas*, the poem which contains perhaps his greatest hymn of freedom, was inspired in the year of his death by the struggle of the Greeks for independence. "Common fame," he says in the preface, "is the only authority which I can allege for the details which form the basis of the poem, and I must trespass upon the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced." "Newspaper erudition" in the best sense was one of Shelley's strong assets. Deeply interested, even during his long absence, in the political situation in England, he found in the events reported in letters or papers the subject-matter for much of his poetry. The mingling of current politics with chance circumstance and literary reminiscence in his occasional improvisations is amusingly illustrated by Mrs. Shelley's account of the writing of *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. The fortunes of Queen Caroline and the conduct of Lord Castlereagh, in 1820 a subject of constant discussion among Englishmen at home and abroad, form the ground-work of Shelley's semi-playful satire. The theme was of course especially fitted to arouse his indignation; but indignation alone, if we may trust Mrs. Shelley's account, did not prompt the poem. While he was one day reading aloud the lately written *Ode to Liberty*, the poet was, in her words, "riotously accompanied by the grunting of a quantity of pigs" brought for sale to the fair of San Giuliano.<sup>1</sup> The grunting accompaniment naturally suggested the chorus of the frogs in Aristophanes; and the result was the political-satirical drama of *Swellfoot*, with the pigs acting as chorus to the grotesque tragedy.

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Shelley, *Biographical and Critical Notes, Poetical Works*, vol. 1, p. lxxi.

This light treatment of current history was, however, far less characteristic of Shelley than the direct and serious consideration which marks the bulk of his poetic utterances on public matters. The events of 1819, for example, gave material for many political and didactic poems. The *Mask of Anarchy* was inspired by news of the Manchester, or Peterloo, massacre, which event Shelley described as the "distant thunders" of an oncoming social revolution, fundamentally due to financial conditions.<sup>1</sup> This poem, and those of the class to which it belongs, which reveal his continuing sympathy with the people and his conviction that genuine reform must be economic rather than political, are also significant as illustrating the practical action with which he responded to every challenge of oppression. When barred from more direct effort, he was always ready to use his pen in behalf of freedom. The pamphleteer and reformer did not, it is evident, die in Shelley when he had printed the pamphlet-poem *Queen Mab*. He was eager, whenever opportunity offered, to arouse the people to a perception of their condition and the means of remedying it; "to inculcate with fervour both the right of resistance and the duty of forbearance"<sup>2</sup> on which he believed true progress to depend. And though the poems written with such practical ends in view are never of the highest excellence, they are of peculiar interest as showing the strength of the tie that bound Shelley to his age, his instant response to the call of need, and his enduring conviction that "oppression is detestable, as being the parent of starvation, nakedness, and ignorance."<sup>3</sup>

The close contact with the life of the time that brought forth the bulk of Shelley's occasional verse had no small influence in shaping his nobler poetry. It is possible that *The Revolt of Islam*, written in 1817, was, at least in part, a protest against the political reaction then setting in, and that it was inspired by the hope of arousing thoughtful Englishmen to a

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Mask of Anarchy*, *Poetical Works*, Cambridge ed., p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Leigh Hunt, November, 1819.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Shelley, *Biographical and Critical Notes, Poetical Works*, vol. I, p. xciv.

realization of the questions at issue.<sup>1</sup> But whatever may have been the genesis of *The Revolt of Islam*, there can be no question that his constant study of contemporary events and conditions marks his later poems with a steadily deepening conception of political and social truth. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fragments of *Charles the First*, a work undertaken by Shelley several years before his death, and one of the last that occupied his thoughts. This play, which he planned to write "in the spirit of human nature, without prejudice or passion,"<sup>2</sup> and which he hoped would "hold a higher rank than *The Cenci* as a work of art,"<sup>3</sup> marks in the verisimilitude of the characters outlined in it the later trend of his imagination toward an uncompromising realism. The grasp of fact that had early made him a reformer was here pressed into the service of poetry, contemporary events and contemporary points of view having become a part of his imaginative as of his moral and practical being. The lovers of freedom in England in the years following the Revolution saw dangers threatening the future of liberty as grave as those that had confronted their forefathers in the time of Charles the First; and Shelley, deeply moved by the issues at stake in his own day, interpreted the seventeenth century with the sympathy and understanding of a fellow-worker in a great cause. The words in which the citizens watching the mask of the Inns of Court contrast the misery of the poor with the luxury of the rich smack of the bitterness of class-feeling in England in the time of George the Fourth: —

"Here is the surfeit which to them who earn  
The niggard wages of the earth, scarce leaves  
The tithe that will support them till they crawl  
Back to her cold hard bosom. Here is health  
Followed by grim disease, glory by shame,  
Waste by lame famine, wealth by squalid want,  
And England's sin by England's punishment."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Forman, *Shelley Soc. Pub.*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Thomas Medwin, July 20, 1820.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Leigh Hunt, January 25, 1822.

<sup>4</sup> *Charles the First*, scene 1, 158-64.

The irony of the nineteenth century rings through the biting scorn of Archy, the Court Fool, as he explains to King and Queen the nature of the commonwealth to be founded in the Plantations by the departing Hampden, Pym, and their friends:—

“New devil’s politics.  
Hell is the pattern of all commonwealths:  
Lucifer was the first republican.”<sup>1</sup>

The grief for an England who had betrayed herself in betraying alike the cause of liberty in France and the traditions of her own people, finds expression in Hampden’s words:—

“I held what I inherited in thee,  
As pawn for that inheritance of freedom  
Which thou hast sold for thy despoiler’s smile.”<sup>2</sup>

And again, when, despairing of his country, he traces his far-off hope in other lands, Hampden speaks the language of Shelley, hardly more in his hatred of tyranny than in the humanity which makes simplicity of living the condition of happiness and freedom; in the spirit of the later century he socializes the romantic return to nature by seeking community-righteousness no less than personal satisfaction in those

“lone regions,  
Where power’s poor dupes and victims yet have never  
Propitiated the savage fear of kings  
With purest blood of noblest hearts; whose dew  
Is yet unstained with tears of those who wake  
To weep each day the wrongs on which it dawns;  
Whose sacred silent air owns yet no echo  
Of formal blasphemies; nor impious rites  
Wrest man’s free worship, from the God who loves,  
To the poor worm who envies us his love!”<sup>3</sup>

Shelley’s divination of the moral and spiritual forces that were to control the future appeared very clearly in the ideal of character that he presented again and again as creating and conditioning the new society. The lack of any disinterested enthusiasm was peculiarly characteristic of his age, a sluggish

<sup>1</sup> *Charles the First*, scene II, 367-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, scene IV, 3-5.

time moved neither by ardent religious faith nor by high hopes for the earthly future of the race. The teachings of Christianity, discredited by the social and political systems with which they were popularly identified, were accepted as matter-of-course by the many, as forms by thinkers, and by the spiritually self-indulgent as offering a refuge from an unequal struggle with the world. The past gave no help. The asceticism of the Puritan, the class-culture of the Renaissance, and the aristocratic humanity of Greece could at most suggest ends which the new democracy, with its power over the forces of nature and its sense of human brotherhood, must reach by untried ways. In this age, perplexed and under a decent conformity profoundly skeptical in temper, Shelley, like Wordsworth, appealed to the generous-minded by presenting to them the two-fold gospel of the supremacy of spiritual forces and the inherent right of mankind to happiness. The spiritual he conceived now as controlling the phenomena through which it reveals itself, now as an illuminating radiance subdued to our understanding as it is revealed by the form embodying it. In this conviction of the reality of the unseen he went hardly further than Wordsworth, with whose belief in the immanent "wisdom and spirit of the universe"<sup>1</sup> and its revelation through the lives of men he is at one. But far more consistently than Wordsworth he united the sense of

"That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
That Beauty in which all things work and move,"<sup>2</sup>

with a recognition of the boundless possibilities of actual life. His hope for mankind rested in the first place on his profound conviction of the unity between the life of nature and that of man. In his early verse he wrote:—

"This world is the nurse of all we know,  
This world is the mother of all we feel."<sup>3</sup>

His greatest hero, Prometheus, triumphed because, in conquering hate, he interpreted to itself a universe bound together

<sup>1</sup> *Prelude*, book I, 401.

<sup>2</sup> *Adonais*, stanza LIV.

<sup>3</sup> *On Death*, 13-14.

and to mankind by the tie of a common nature. But Shelley's interest centered far less in the "dear green earth" in which men's hearts are now at home than in the progressive revelations of truth possible to the expanding mind of the race. Where Wordsworth accepted as the measure of human capacity the moderate happiness of a life passed in natural conditions, Shelley declared the right of every man to the fullest development of all his powers. In his belief in men's capacity for growth and their right to freedom, he was closely allied with the Utilitarians, who, not yet under the banner of a name, were asserting the importance of liberty and culture for the attainment of human happiness. And while he widened the sphere of men's intellectual and practical activities, he did not at all weaken the foundations of their morality. The simplicity and spontaneity that mark the actions of his typical characters, though at first sight purely natural, are in the last analysis among those hardly-won virtues which form the basis of character; they are possible only through long intellectual and social discipline, are the outcome of right ways of living and organizing life, are the gift, not of unaided human nature but of the highest and most far-reaching civilization.

It was inevitable that one who believed in freedom as firmly as did Shelley should think much of the nature, rights and functions of the individual. He declared that the essence of personality consists in its difference from others over and above the likeness it bears to them, and that the most important part of moral science lies in understanding the general effects of men's peculiar characteristics and the tendencies of these characteristics in particular cases; the differences of men, rather than actions due to their habitual and superficial resemblances, are in his eyes the vital forces "which make human life what it is, and are the fountains of all the good and evil with which its entire surface is so widely and impartially overspread."<sup>1</sup> Individuality of character and conduct thus becomes the condition of

<sup>1</sup> *Speculations on Morals, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 318.

progress, which results far more from the development of men's capacities than from their acceptance of the common stock of wisdom. This assertion of the right of the individual to the fullest measure of self-realization, the plea for which rested on grounds of social even more than of personal morality, was saved from the capricious antinomianism into which it might easily have fallen by Shelley's acceptance of reason as the supreme power in the ordering of life. In *The Assassins*, written when he was nineteen, he said of the members of the early Christian community: "They esteemed the human understanding to be the paramount rule of human conduct. . . . It appeared impossible to them that any doctrine could be subversive of social happiness which is not capable of being confuted by arguments derived from the nature of existing things."<sup>1</sup> In allegiance to reason and the truth "derived from the nature of existing things," the individual found both discipline and fulfillment, and thus became essentially social and moral.

Yet even reason, highly as Shelley esteemed it, was in his eyes chiefly of value as leading to the imaginative sympathy which frees individuality from its narrowing limitations by breaking down all barriers between the self and others. Entrance "into the meditations, designs and destinies of something beyond ourselves," he made the essential condition of that enlargement of mind on which virtue, personal or social, depends. Disinterested care for others he considered the most elementary form of the benevolent propensities, the basis of everything that has refined and exalted humanity; and an action or a motive to action he defined as virtuous only in "so far as it is disinterested, or partakes . . . of the nature of generalized self-love."<sup>2</sup> In a characteristic passage in *The Coliseum* he says: "There is a circle which comprehends, as well as one which mutually excludes, all things which feel. And, with respect to man, his public and his private happiness consists in diminishing the circumference which includes those

<sup>1</sup> *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> *Proposals for an Association*, *Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 381.

resembling himself, until they become one with him, and he with them.”<sup>1</sup> The originality of his characters consists, not in their assertion of self, but in the enlargement of their circle of individuality till their interests are identical with those of their fellow-men.

This universal humanity, marking all his greatest heroes, is nowhere more evident than in the many descriptive references to Jesus, who, as a man, stood to Shelley in his mature years for all that is good. And Shelley saw in Jesus not only the embodiment of goodness, the epitome of those qualities for which

“The wise, the mild, the lofty, and the just”<sup>2</sup>

have so often suffered in his name, but the being invincible in gentleness and benignity who has “influenced in the most memorable manner the opinions and the fortunes of the human species.”<sup>3</sup> Faith in the transforming power of noble character was, indeed, a chief article in Shelley’s creed, supporting his courage when he was forced to turn from what he considered the more practical field of moral and political science to indirect teaching through poetry, and supplying him with those “beautiful idealisms of moral excellence” in which he trusted to prepare men’s minds for the reception of the “reasoned principles of moral conduct”<sup>4</sup> that would ultimately bring about the establishment of a new society.

Shelley’s confidence in the power of thought to redeem the world, like his faith in the social value of individuality, rested ultimately on his belief that society is essentially moral in nature, and that government, in so far as it is more than a necessary evil, is a moral institution. The virtue of the state and the virtue of the private person were identical in the eyes of the follower of Godwin, since both alike propose as their end the production of the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of

<sup>1</sup> *Prose Works*, vol. III, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, act I, 605.

<sup>3</sup> *Essay on Christianity*, *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.

sensitive beings, find their sanction in the perfection with which they fulfill this end, and attain perfection only as the happiness they produce is of the highest spiritual order. The moral qualities which any government should aim to develop are neither more nor less than the elementary virtues on which individual goodness depends: the benevolence which is "the desire to be the author of good," and the justice which is "an apprehension of the manner in which that good is to be done."<sup>1</sup>

This identification of public and private virtue is of course not new with Shelley: Plato had made the good of society the test of virtue; Shaftesbury's speculations a hundred years before were fired with enthusiasm for a social ideal of goodness; the acceptance of general rather than personal ends inspired the thinkers of the eighteenth century in their plans for a reconstructed world. But Shelley carried out the principles of his predecessors to a conclusion more truly democratic than theirs: where they had asked of the individual the larger social virtues, he further demanded of society the tenderness and refinement of the noblest individual character. The enlargement of every man's experience by the appropriation of new ideas and ideals, the exaltation of it by the contemplation of beauty, he saw to be as important to the well-being of the community as to that of the individual. The basis of political and social as well as of private morality he found in the breaking down, through imaginative sympathy, of the barriers between the self and the non-self. Sympathy and social justice thus became with him synonymous terms, extending beyond the realms of daily personal intercourse on the one hand into the more artificial and formal organization of mankind, and on the other into men's relations with the animal world. Because of the essential humanity that binds men together, he held political, social, and religious distinctions to be without significance, or, in so far as they hindered any one from doing every possible good to every other creature, positively harmful. Even domestic affection was of value only as it might draw those outside its immediate circle

<sup>1</sup> *Speculations on Morals, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 306.

into the circumference of sympathy, and so generalize or socialize the narrower emotion.

Shelley's vivid sense of men's community in nature and their potential unity in purpose appeared very clearly in his faith in their joint action and common experience. He delighted, in his poetry, to present those great occasions "when the hearts of individuals vibrate . . . for a people,"<sup>1</sup> and the multitude is united in a single impulse of gratitude and triumph. It is in such times as these that visions of truth are clearest and most uplifting, and that the human mind presses close to the mystic sense of ultimate reality. Cythna addressing the thronging multitude united in the joy of victory becomes the "prophetess of love." The Earth joining with all the forces of nature and of life in the hymn of universal thanksgiving penetrates to the very heart of humanity, and sees for the moment the spirit that unites mankind supreme in all its various manifestations: —

"Man, oh, not men! a chain of linked thought,  
Of love and might to be divided not.

. . . . .  
Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,  
Whose nature is its own divine controul,  
Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea."<sup>2</sup>

Nor is this a mere rhapsody. The principles which Shelley embodied in his poetry gave him the measure which he constantly applied to the judgment of actual events. The moral and social value of associated endeavor as such he clearly recognized in the statement that, whether Ireland's effort for Catholic Emancipation succeeded or not, the general interest in the subject formed an occasion which "the ardent votary of the religion of Philanthropy dare not leave unseized," because in enthusiasm for a common cause "individual interest has, in a certain degree, quitted individual concern to generalize itself with universal feeling."<sup>3</sup> Again in the letter entitled *The Death*

<sup>1</sup> *Proposals for an Association, Prose Works*, vol. 1, p. 367.

<sup>2</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, act iv, 394-402.

<sup>3</sup> *Proposals for an Association, Prose Works*, vol. 1, p. 368.

of the *Princess Charlotte*, he said that common mourning for any public calamity is good because it "helps to maintain that connexion between one man and another, and all men considered as a whole, which is the bond of social life."<sup>1</sup>

The conception of man as an essentially moral being, and of mankind as fundamentally united in moral nature, lay at the heart of Shelley's idea of happiness. Happiness he made depend on the satisfaction of mind and soul far more than on the gratification of bodily wants. "Your physical wants," he wrote, "are few, whilst those of your mind and heart cannot be numbered or described, from their multitude and complication."<sup>2</sup> On the supremacy of these higher wants and on the need of infinite activity if they are to be gratified, his chief hope for the progress as well as the happiness of mankind ultimately rested. In his prose works as well as in his poems he repeated again and again the idea inspiring *Cythna's* picture of the future:—

"Our toil from thought all glorious forms shall cull,  
To make this Earth, our home, more beautiful,  
And Science, and her sister Poesy,  
Shall clothe in light the fields and cities of the free!"<sup>3</sup>

The last act of *Prometheus Unbound* is saved from the blight of fatuous satisfaction in achievement by the energy of the spiritual forces that become operative when once humanity is freed from the tyranny of power and of material necessity. This world toward which he believed the race to be moving — a world made infinitely rich by science and infinitely beautiful by art — is marked by the simplicity and moderation of physical desires. He condemned the morality of his day because men were content to remain under the tyranny of physical wants, "meaner" than the high desires of which they were capable, and because they forgot the ends of their passions in indulgence of the passions themselves. He even anticipated

<sup>1</sup> *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Essay on Christianity*, *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> *Laom and Cythna*, canto v, stanza 51, 5.

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But the importance of the struggle to maintain man's power over woman increasing till we & become in more vividly that at the moment the work of every person being "done for the other, & nothing else." "Freedom among these relations is virtue and liberty. — Human rights are inseparable from man's character; man the knowledge and beauty, the intelligence and health which are the results of natural living. Over and above the rest of the work of Shelley's vision there is physical, material, & aesthetic importance was the work the relation is to a race which should have Manhood as well as a woman's freedom. It was in the best sense a respecter of persons. "To himself," he says, "under all the circumstances and consequences of a particular case, how the greatest humanity and purest quality of happiness will come from any action; this is to be just, and there is no other justice." Such justice concerned with the particular rather than the general and training understanding rather than judgment, was naturally the supreme law of a society the cornerstone of which was faith in individuality and in knowledge. This conception of justice Shelley applied to the material as to the

*Peter Bell the Third part 2*

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### • *Paracanthus* (continued) $\pi$ 3 E

1. *Organization of Business in France* (1913) and 2. *Business in France* (1914).

• Discussion by R. G. E. P. M. W. H. W. L. P. S. •  
• From a Committee Report, 1911, p. 127. •

spiritual conditions of men in the actual world. Freedom he insisted was not only an abstract and political right; it also involved possession of the means of livelihood and full opportunity for the development of mind and soul. In *The Mask of Anarchy* he defines its scope:—

“For the labourer thou art bread,  
And a comely table spread  
From his daily labour come  
To a neat and happy home.

“Thou art clothes, and fire, and food  
For the trampled multitude —

“Science, Poetry and Thought  
Are thy lamps; they make the lot  
Of the dwellers in a cot  
So serene, they curse it not.”

“Spirit, Patience, Gentleness,  
All that can adorn and bless,  
Art thou — let deeds not words express  
Thine exceeding loveliness.”<sup>1</sup>

These lines, inspired by the horrors of the Peterloo massacre, give literal expression to his conviction that, if society is to fulfill its proper function, the share of every man in the products of his labor must be large enough to insure his normal development.

Living in an age when the luxury of the few was offset by the want of the many, Shelley gave much thought to such practical questions as money-earning and the distribution of the means and rewards of labor as a condition of the higher human well-being. “The rights of man,” he declared in his youth, “are liberty, and an equal participation of the commonage of nature.”<sup>2</sup> The object of government and the measure of its success, he said later, “is not merely the quantity of happiness enjoyed by individuals as sensitive beings, but the mode in which it should be distributed among them as social beings.

<sup>1</sup> *Mask of Anarchy*, stanzas 54-64.

<sup>2</sup> *Declaration of Rights*, 3, *Prose Works*, vol. 1, p. 393.

It is not enough, if such a coincidence can be conceived as possible, that one person or class of persons should enjoy the highest happiness, whilst another is suffering a disproportionate degree of misery. It is necessary that the happiness produced by the common efforts, and preserved by the common care, should be distributed according to the just claims of each individual; if not, although the quantity produced should be the same, the end of society would remain unfulfilled.”<sup>1</sup> The failure of the economic system of his day to give happiness to rich or poor served in Shelley’s eyes for its sufficient indictment, the crimes that degraded its poverty and the luxury that corrupted its wealth uniting to condemn, not only the glaring inequality of condition on which it rested, but the whole superstructure of social forms built on that unstable foundation.

Shelley’s belief in the moral constitution of society naturally resulted in his insistence on moral and intellectual methods of reform. Liberty and happiness he repeatedly declared impossible till every chain of “habit and superstition” had been broken. But these chains, forged by institutional tyranny, he thought could be cast off only when men had themselves become good; had learned to “contemplate actions and objects as they really are,”<sup>2</sup> and to establish the reign of justice by themselves becoming just. The individual and society can therefore advance no faster than moral and intellectual culture; reforms can be effected only as character is ready for them. “The consequences of the immediate extension of the elective franchise to every male adult, would be,” he said in 1817, “to place power in the hands of men who have been rendered brutal and torpid and ferocious by ages of slavery,” and so to give to the demagogue what should belong to the legislator.<sup>3</sup> Though he believed a pure republic far preferable to a monarchy, yet he thought no plan could be more unreasonable and less likely to bring about good results than the abolition of “the regal and

<sup>1</sup> *Speculations on Morals*, *Prose Works*, vol. II, pp. 302-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Essay on Christianity*, *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 364.

<sup>3</sup> *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote*, *Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 95.

the aristocratical branches of our constitution, before the public mind, through many gradations of improvement, shall have arrived at the maturity which can disregard these symbols of its childhood.”<sup>1</sup> Violence he again and again deprecated, as not only wrong in itself but as the very means to produce wretchedness and slavery. The French Revolution gave him constant illustrations of the evils that come from defending right by methods which could be used to uphold tyranny. In addressing the Irish, he urged them to endure their wrongs till the times were ripe for change; to remember that they were not fit for higher things so long as they were willing to employ force in any cause whatsoever, and to lay the only sure foundation of a better order of society, by forming “habits of SOBRIETY, REGULARITY, and THOUGHT.”<sup>2</sup> In order that these habits might be established and strengthened, even in the unrest and danger then prevailing in Ireland, he insisted that the work of every one, however employed, should be exerted in its accustomed manner, and that the public communication of the truth for which the nation was struggling should in no way impede the established usages of society, though it was fitted in the end to do them away.<sup>3</sup>

The history of Christianity afforded him even clearer proof than the French Revolution or the conditions in Ireland that the greatest and most spiritual of reforms must fail when men have not been prepared by moral and intellectual training to understand and act on the truth which they have nominally accepted. The “mighty hopes” of Jesus for “the abolition of artificial distinctions among mankind” were, he thought, in the nature of things, doomed to disappointment because the system which he and his immediate followers tried to establish was one which “must result from, rather than precede, the moral improvement of human kind.”<sup>4</sup> The growth of equality

<sup>1</sup> *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> *An Address to the Irish People, Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 331.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> *Essay on Christianity, Prose Works*, vol. II, pp. 369-71.

in his own day he believed to result from the increase in it of justice, the increase of justice in its turn coming from the wider spread of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Since reform seemed to him possible only when the minds of men were prepared for change, he considered it folly to act on any belief till it was supported by intelligent public opinion. "Nothing," he said, in his *Address to the Irish People*, "can be more rash and thoughtless, than to shew in ourselves singular instances of any particular doctrine, before the general mass of the people are so convinced by the reasons of the doctrine, that it will be no longer singular";<sup>2</sup> and in a letter written a little earlier he exclaimed: "How useless to attempt by singular examples to renovate the face of society, until reasoning has made so comprehensive a change as to emancipate the experimentalist from the resulting evils, and the prejudice with which his opinion (which ought to have weight, for the sake of virtue) would be heard by the immense majority!"<sup>3</sup> His belief that "force must rule till right is ready" is illustrated in its various aspects by the great struggles between good and evil that he pictures in his poetry. The tyrant was restored to power in *The Revolt of Islam* because the world was not ready for freedom; Prometheus triumphed over Jupiter only when he shuddered to hear repeated the curse that he had himself uttered; Beatrice Cenci became a tragic character because she failed in the forgiveness that would make her most truly human. All that Shelley wrote is, indeed, one long plea for the development of the perfect understanding, which, by casting out fear and conquering hate, is alone able to overcome injustice.

But though he stanchly upheld the necessity of moral preparation before reform is possible, Shelley was a tireless foe of oppression and an impassioned propagandist of the ideas on which he believed fundamental changes in the social conditions of his time to depend. For the improvement of the world he relied only on truth; but on truth active and militant, the foe to

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Christianity, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> *Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> "Letter to Elizabeth Hitchener," October 8, 1811.

intellectual acquiescence in wrong as it is to every form of tyranny and prejudice. Believing that if mankind is to attain to any substantial measure of happiness, "the system of society as it exists at present, must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims and of forms," <sup>1</sup> he made no mental compromises with the established order of things. Intellectual resistance to evil he regarded, indeed, as the first duty of man, lying beyond any possible control by the state, and the more sacred as the nature of truth prevented its advocates from using arms in its defense. Untrammeled expression of opinion and open discussion of all subjects thus seemed to Shelley the essential conditions of progress, because only by their means could ideas be generally disseminated and truth brought home to the waiting minds of men. His speeches in Ireland and his comments on affairs in England were a continuous plea for free discussion of the questions at stake; the association that he formed for effecting Catholic Emancipation was planned primarily as an association for discussion of the subject and dissemination of knowledge about it; he ceaselessly upheld the right of the press "to publish any opinion on any subject which the writer may entertain," <sup>2</sup> and declared that there could be no middle way between its entire emancipation and a suppression of free speech which must be fatal to progress. Given the right to unhampered expression of opinion, he trusted absolutely in the power of truth to protect itself against error. Falsehood he conceived of as the scorpion that would in the end sting itself to death, while truth contains in itself the elements of permanence as well as of virtue. Applying this doctrine to the control of the press, he asks in a passage that reminds us of John Stuart Mill, whether those in favor of censoring it cannot see that "what is rational will stand by its reason, and what is true stand by its truth, as all that is foolish will fall by its folly, and all that is false be controverted by its own falsehood." <sup>3</sup> Nowhere is Shelley's position as to the nature and

<sup>1</sup> "Letter to Leigh Hunt," May 1, 1820.

<sup>2</sup> *An Address to the Irish People, Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

methods of reform more clearly expressed than in *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote*, where he insisted that the advocates of change must learn the will of the majority and, if that majority was against them, must abide by the decision till such time as the nation was prepared to accept their policies. The minority thus lives under a double law: it must submit to the rule of force till it can make right prevail, and it must make every effort, even to the sacrifice of goods and life, to bring what it believes to be right, home to the minds and consciences of its opponents. Its work is complete only when right has been transformed into will and an enlightened society desires what its clearer-sighted leaders have long seen to be good.

By making intellectual enlightenment the agent of moral culture, Shelley not only carried on the work of the thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but supplemented the weakness of the social and aesthetic systems laid down by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Imaginatively sympathetic with them, deeply influenced by their writings, and agreeing in the main with their conception of poetry and its relation to life, his trust in reason led him to a perception of the wholeness and unity of mental activity which they failed to reach. Coleridge made the merely logical understanding infinitely inferior to the philosophical faculty of spiritual intuition, — to the soul's eye by which alone truth can be perceived. Wordsworth described it as the power that analyzed and dissected: at worst the degrading curiosity that led its victim to "peep and botanize"<sup>1</sup> in sacred places, at best the bondsman of the imagination, waiting until its theoretic knowledge should put on "the form of flesh and blood" and become "a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man."<sup>2</sup> Shelley, like his great predecessors, considered the imagination the supreme intellectual power, the explorer of the unknown regions of matter and spirit, and the discoverer of those truths of which practical life is later to be the embodiment. But though he was at one with Wordsworth

<sup>1</sup> *A Poet's Epitaph*, 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Preface* to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

and Coleridge as to the peculiar office of the imagination, nature and training made it impossible for him to recognize it as in any way antagonistic to reason. From his teachers in the eighteenth century he had inherited an enthusiastic belief in the power of knowledge and intellect. Mrs. Shelley testified that "he deliberated at one time whether he should dedicate himself to poetry or metaphysics."<sup>1</sup> Though we can hardly doubt that the question was decided before the deliberation began, the fact of his indecision marks the strength of his passion for knowledge. Without this passion he was, indeed, singularly likely to have lost himself in the mazes of a semi-imaginative pseudo-science. Like many of the poets and thinkers of the time, he was at first interested in the occult as well as in the scientific aspects of knowledge. Characteristic of his curiosity as to the mysterious, is the account in *Alastor* of the fascination which led him as a boy to strive to penetrate the inmost secrets of nature:—

"I have watched  
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed  
In charnels and on coffins, . . . . .  
  
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings  
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,  
Thy messenger, to render up the tale  
Of what we are."<sup>2</sup>

But just as the passion for humanity saved him, the most inwardly intense of the poets of his generation, from the excesses of an anti-social romanticism, so he was rescued from the tyranny of the fantastic and imaginary by his love of truth and his delight in the exercise of his reason. He is thus able clearly to recognize the part that thought plays in the intellectual and social life. He defines reason "as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another"; imagination, "as mind

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Shelley, *Biographical and Critical Notes, Poetical Works*, vol. 1, p. lviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Alastor*, 20-9.

acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.<sup>1</sup> "Reason," he says, "respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance."<sup>2</sup> The creative power he considers the prime agent of human knowledge because it brings to consciousness and vitalizes what reason has presented to our contemplation; because through it alone knowledge becomes an active, operant part of one's being. But while agreeing with Wordsworth and Coleridge in this recognition of the shaping power of the imagination and its supreme place in men's higher intellectual and spiritual life, Shelley was at one with Ben Jonson and Dryden in his enthusiasm for reason. He thus took a long step toward reconciling the claims of the intellect, the watchword of the previous century, with those of the imagination, the shibboleth of his own generation.

The vital relationship existing between our rational and imaginative faculties and the consequent wholeness of the higher intellectual life was as essential a part of Shelley's social philosophy as of his theory of poetry. The imagination he regarded as not only the power through which individuals might grow to happiness and goodness, but as the faculty of human nature on which every gradation of their progress depends.<sup>3</sup> Its work is not done when it has imaged forth the ideas that are to rule the future; it has a further office in bringing home to the heart of mankind the truths that it reveals. This socialization of ideas Shelley considered the special function of the imagination: ignorance and evil, due far less to the lack of what is usually called knowledge than to an isolating poverty of sympathy, are to be overcome chiefly by that enlargement of intelligent understanding which unites individuals

<sup>1</sup> *A Defence of Poetry, Prose Works*, vol. III, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Speculations on Morals, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 309.

in a community of purpose and action. The higher emotional life, which contains in itself the essential elements of poetry, he held to be as necessary for the maintenance and growth of any true society as for the advance of literature and the arts. The connection between imaginative and general social development he found amply illustrated in history, both political and literary, but particularly in the drama, which has invariably reached its highest excellence as the community has come nearest to perfection, and fallen into decay with the corruption of manners and the extinction of those energies which sustain the soul of social life.<sup>1</sup> This interdependence, so evident in the case of the drama, exists between all poetry and the state; the two flourish together, the periods of their greatness closely coinciding, and a decline in imaginative power always heralding a collapse of material civilization. Shelley's conception of the imagination as the essentially social faculty was the conditioning factor in all his theories of reform: it offered the ideal of community as of individual life, prescribed the means by which that ideal might be attained, and contained "within itself the seeds . . . of . . . social renovation."<sup>2</sup>

It is a corollary of this article of Shelley's creed, that he believed the noblest poetry, like the truest virtue, to be the product of a refined and civilized life; that is, of a life in which spiritual perceptions and spiritual powers rule over material conditions. The *Defence of Poetry*, in which his ideas of the moral and social functions of the imagination are most fully worked out, was called forth by Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry*, which defended the theory that poetry was the product of the more ignorant and barbarous ages and so is destined to pass away as the world grows to civilization. This attack on what Shelley considered the higher morality of art brought forth an answer in the *Defence*, which reminds us of Sidney's in its loftiness of style as well as in its exalted conception of the office of poetry. Shelley bases his plea for poetry on the fact that, as it is at once the creation and the creator of spiritual

<sup>1</sup> *A Defence of Poetry, Prose Works*, vol. III, pp. 117-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

and intellectual forces, it can exist only as those forces, actually or potentially, make up the substance of men's lives. Barbarous and rude nations, so long as they remained under the tyranny of material necessity, were incapable of poetry, because they were without any true imaginative insight. But the tyranny of matter oppressed the imaginative life of the early nineteenth century hardly less than that of the barbarous past; the age crushed by nature and the age boasting its command over nature were alike negative and poverty-stricken because alike controlled by the forces that they should govern. Nor is this slavery due only to poverty or to its counterpart, luxury; the higher life is to-day crushed by the multitude of our intellectual as well as of our material possessions; it is overpowered by the mass of external facts that men have as yet neither understood nor assimilated. "We have," says Shelley, "more moral, political, and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry, in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes . . . we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest."<sup>1</sup> The realization of what we know, lost in our very attempt to master the external universe, will gradually be recovered as knowledge of this universe becomes a part of ourselves, and as a clearer view of moral truths restores the balance between our inner and outer natures. Through poetry alone, which "compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know,"<sup>2</sup> can this balance be restored and a materialistic age escape the dominance of the lower powers; we cannot be truly free until a Dante or a Shakespeare, a Milton or a Bacon, a Raphael or a Michael Angelo, arouses the mind to such activity and energy as will make it the master rather than the slave of the phenomenal world.

<sup>1</sup> *A Defence of Poetry, Prose Works*, vol. III, pp. 134-5.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

But if it is only through poetry that we can thus control experience, the greatest poetry is itself possible only in a social order which allows free play to men's sense of beauty and acquaints them familiarly with goodness. The almost universal lack of these conditions Shelley considered the chief reason why poetry has hitherto occupied itself with suffering and sorrow; while ignorance of beauty and insensitiveness to it continue, he says, "it often requires a higher degree of skill in a poet to make beauty, virtue, and harmony poetical, that is, to give them an idealized and rhythmical analogy with the predominating emotions of his readers, — than to make injustice, deformity and discord poetical."<sup>1</sup> It is because humanity knows the darker passions and therefore sympathizes with them, that men prefer the *Inferno* to the more truly beautiful *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* and are perpetually fascinated by such a character as Beatrice Cenci, who, had she been wiser and better, must in present conditions have been less successful in "teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself."<sup>2</sup>

Shelley's perception of the profound social significance of the imaginative life related his theory of poetry to the most practical of his efforts for reform. Poetry was never to him an end in itself: it was among the chief means by which the highest ends of humanity might be attained. True to this faith, when forced by circumstances to turn from active efforts in the cause of reform, he supported himself by the conviction that through the indirect teaching of poetry he was moving mankind to imagine, and so eventually to create, a better social order. Nor was this all: if the poet was a reformer, the reformer was also a poet. In his long and earnest effort to bring about better conditions in England, whether through Catholic Emancipation or Parliamentary Reform, through the claim for freedom of thought or for economic justice to the oppressed, he insisted that only the methods which he set forth in his poetry should

<sup>1</sup> *On the Devil, and Devils, Prose Works*, vol. II, p. 402.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to *The Cenci*.

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be employed, that to every situation should be applied the doctrines of hope and justice and kindness whose general acceptance he thought necessary to any genuine advance of society.

For the time being his teachings seemed remote and Utopian: he was dismissed as a dreamer, while others, more in sympathy with its limited and materialized ideals, brought home to the age the actual conditions in which men lived, the ends that might be here and now attained, the means by which the practical worker could begin the task of the day or the morrow. But while his fellow-laborers were occupied with finding immediate solutions for immediate problems, Shelley reasserted the fundamental conceptions that even the generous in their zeal for speedy reform had forgotten, and so became the diviner and prophet of the deeper brotherhood and the more genuine humanity that were to inspire later efforts. The world that he foresaw recognizes as supreme only those spiritual forces which unite mankind in realization of the higher life, and it is to be created from our present world of violence and wrong by a culture which presses into its service all the resources of nature and art. The way to it may be slower and more difficult than Shelley dreamed. But his vivid apprehension of its principles, his fervent advocacy of them, above all the "beautiful idealisms" through which he moved men to desire its coming, make him the true poet of the democracy of the nineteenth century.

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